REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCENARY
I WOKE UP PILOTING THE STRONGEST STARSHIP!
NOVEL 4
WRITTEN BY
Ryuto
ILLUSTRATED BY
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

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ORIENT

REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCENARY
I woke up piloting the strongest starship!
"Degenerate" wasn't quite the word I was looking for. To put it bluntly, the place seemed a little bit decadent. Deep in the back alleys, I could see some attractive androids trying to bring in customers.
"Is something wrong?"
"Oh no. Don't worry about it."
Mei
Hiro
Hiro heads to Oriental Industries to get Mei upgraded, but then...

"As both head of the family and her grandfather, I am grateful to you all."
"I'd like to say it was nothing, but honestly, we went through hell and back."
I explained to Count Dalenwald how we protected Chris in as much detail as possible.
"Hmm... How fortunate it was that she met you."
Abraham Dalenwald
Elma
Mimi
Chris

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Afterword

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MEZAMETARA SAIKYO SOBI TO UCHUSEN MOCHI DATTA NODE,
IKKODATE MEZASHITE YOHEI TOSHITE JIYU NI IKITAI Vol.4
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Prologue

I WOKE UP to the feeling of someone's breath upon me. I was still half-asleep, but I could feel a number of things: a soft bed; warm, comfy sheets; and someone's hand caressing my cheek. I sighed contentedly and pulled the hand closer.

"Ah…" There was a flustered voice, but I ignored it and hugged whoever it was. The body was warm, and smelled sweet, like milk.

I thought for a moment about the silent, docile person beside me. They must have been a girl because I was the only man around. Definitely not Mimi: this person didn't have her more-than-ample breasts. Probably not Elma, either—she was slender, but certainly not this delicate. Naturally, it wasn't our Maidroid, Mei, either. So who was in bed with me, then?

When I opened my eyes, I saw a black-haired girl blushing madly. Her eyes, like two glittering pieces of onyx, gazed back passionately.

"Good morning, Chris," I said.

"…Good morning, Hiro."

We stayed in bed and gazed at each other for a good while, both of us finding it difficult to avert our eyes.

***

"Really, dude? *Really?!*" Elma admonished me, yanking at her beautiful shoulder-length silver hair in irritation. Her jade-colored eyes were narrowed angrily at us both, and her youthful lips were curled into a frown.

"We just slept *next* to each other!" I explained. "Nothing else!!!"

"Y-yes, that's right!!!" Chris backed me up.

I didn't know if it was due to bad luck or my carelessness, but either way, Elma was lecturing me first thing in the morning—not that "morning"

really exists as a concept in outer space. She had noticed the very moment Chris and I left my room together.

"If you say so, Chris, I guess it must be true…" Elma looked us both over from head to toe. Her elf ears, poking out from her silver hair like arrows, bobbed up and down as if they were searching for something.

I am not a crook! I'm innocent! Not to brag, but if we did do something, Chris wouldn't be standing right now. I'm pretty well-endowed, after all.

"You should both be more responsible," Elma continued, "but Chris, that goes double for you. Each of your actions can affect a whole lot of people. That's what it means to have your blood, right?"

"Yes, ma'am…" Chris looked down dejectedly.

Elma was referring to the blood of the Count Dalenwald family that ran through Christina Dalenwald's veins—the blood of a noblewoman.

Chris' parents had been tragically killed by her uncle, who wanted the title of count for himself. And he'd had murderous intentions toward Chris, as well. We had dealt with some assassins, but it wasn't time to relax just yet. Serena owed me a favor, so I'd joined her Pirate-Hunting Unit to use them as camouflage. Our current problem was how Chris' uncle would react now that he was cornered.

"N-now, Elma, I think that's enough…" Our lovely, tan-haired Mimi covered for us. But she too fell victim to Elma's murderous glares.

"*Excuse* me, Mimi? Wasn't she supposed to be sleeping with you last night?"

"Waaaah! I'm so *sorryyy*!!!"

Elma pinched Mimi's plump cheeks and started tugging on them. So then Chris' staying in my room overnight must have been Mimi's doing, after all.

"Hey, hey, that's enough," I declared. "Nothing happened in the end, so why don't we let bygones be bygones?"

Elma glared at me as if to demand, *Are you in* any *position to say that?* But I cared not! Not one bit! *Now let Mimi go! The poor girl's about to cry.*

“Ugh, whatever,” she sighed. “I won’t keep harping on it, but just be careful.”

“Aye aye!” I saluted.

“Yes, ma’am,” Chris meekly assented.

Might as well get tidied up and have some breakfast. What’s for grub today, I wonder?

Chapter 1:
Our New Crew Member is a Maidroid!

"THE RESORT WAS NICE, but I'm never calmer than when I'm in the *Krishna*," I said with a sigh.

"That so?" Elma's voice came through the speakers of the cockpit.

"Yep! The comforts of home, sweet home."

"I feel the same," Mimi agreed. "It's lovely how I always feel safe and sound here."

"But…" I continued, "I'm sure it's a bit cramped for your tastes, Chris."

"Yes…a little bit."

The day after we spoke with Serena, we went on the *Krishna* to meet up with our ward-slash-living bait, the private carrier ship *Pelican IV*, and began bodyguard duty.

I call it bodyguard duty, but honestly, it was a pretty cushy gig. We spent most of our time riding around in FTL, occasionally visiting trading and mining stations in other systems to avoid suspicion. If the *Pelican IV* had to stay somewhere long to resupply or unload, we could just follow the *Flying Tortoise* around for a while.

But you never know when space pirates might attack, so we couldn't relax too much—that went double for any assassins sent by Chris' uncle.

Since it would be too exhausting to be on guard constantly, Elma and I were taking shifts in the cockpit, guarding the *Pelican IV* and keeping watch for enemies. Meanwhile, everyone else was resting in the cafeteria. Well, I say "everyone," but the only formal crew members here were us and Mimi, while Chris was just our ward and—

"Master, I have brought refreshments." Interrupting my thoughts, our Maidroid, Mei, came into the cockpit with drinks.

Mei had long, straight, black hair adorned with a pristine, white maid's brim. She wore traditional maid's clothing, complete with a skirt that

fell to her knees. Her slightly emotionless, reserved features were decorated with red-framed fashion glasses. Truly, she was perfect. Indeed, she was the last person to join our crew.

"Thanks." I accepted a drink and attached it to a nearby gravity sphere—which was basically an absurdly high-tech, spherical drink bottle. "Just so you know, I promise I'll upgrade you as soon as I can, Mei."

"You do not need worry, Master. I will always prioritize your safety. Though I cannot perform complex calculations, my current body is more than satisfactory."

"Really? Milo did say that your functionality would decrease, but I can't tell the difference myself."

"Correct. At this time, it poses no issue for everyday service." Mei remained expressionless as she looked my way. I had set her emotion value almost to minimum in order to keep her robo-girl charm intact, suiting both my ego and my personal tastes. But I had to wonder how she felt about it.

I was a little scared to ask.

"Well, if you want to change anything about yourself during your upgrade, just let me know. We have enough room in the budget to buy several more of you, so don't hesitate to break the bank a little."

"I take no issue with the settings you prepared for me, Master. Thank you for your consideration. I will consult you should I wish to change anything."

"Awesome. You do that." I continued guard duty as we talked, though that really only entailed keeping pace in FTL drive with the supply ship, so I wasn't doing much. Basically, I just had to keep an eye on the compound sensor for sudden interdictions that might pull us out of FTL.

This compound sensor could see everything: minute changes in gravity near other spaceships and asteroids, the vibrations in space that happened when someone entered FTL drive or hyperdrive, and even the paths of ships that moved through space.

Mimi had studied it and did her best to explain it to me, but I didn't even understand a quarter of it. Basically, I just know that it's a sensor you can use like radar when you're in FTL drive or hyperdrive.

Faster-than-light travel falls under one umbrella for the most part, but also, different ships go at different speeds. Put simply, huge ships could only do like, two or three times the speed of light, while smaller, high-speed crafts could go more than ten times as fast. The fastest ships could go over twenty times the speed of light.

So, what happens with the Urashima effect, or time dilation, or whatever? Well, I don't really get it, but apparently, FTL drive and hyperdrive means either entering a state where the flow of time is different —or travelling in a totally different space altogether, so you're supposedly free from the theory of relativity. Honestly, I really don't get advanced physics. My brain just isn't built to understand faster-than-light technology. Or maybe I'm just not interested enough.

As long as I can use the thing, I'm fine. It's like how in my old universe, I didn't understand how smartphones or PCs worked, but I used them just fine. Same deal here.

"Awfully boring day, given all that happened yesterday," I said to Mei.

"Yes, it seems so. Perhaps Balthazar was forced to regather his forces after losing so many space pirates."

"I did destroy around two hundred ships." The numbers involved in the Cierra III attack were unprecedented. But in the end, once the planet's defense system came back to life and Serena's Pirate-Hunting Unit jumped in, the pirates suffered major losses. "As long as nothing crazy happens, it's smooth sailing from here."

If the *Pelican IV* were attacked, then Serena's Pirate-Hunting Unit could arrive within twenty to thirty minutes. All the *Krishna* would have to do is buy time. The *Pelican IV*, with its single bodyguard, no doubt looked like easy prey to pirates, but it was actually a clever trap. If pirates attacked, they'd be surrounded and destroyed. Quite the dirty trick, isn't it? And guess who taught Serena this devious trap? No doubt he was twisted, whoever he was.

Spoiler alert: me. It was me. I did it. Call me dirty, and I'll say thank you. Especially if you're space-trash like pirates.

“Do you have connections with the imperial fleet, Master?” Mei asked me.

“Yep, though it’s really all thanks to luck.” My relationship with Serena was a…complex one. I didn’t particularly like her, but we somehow kept ending up together. I guess fate works even in the endless expanse of space.

Serena was a blonde-haired, drop-dead beauty, the daughter of Marquess Holz, *and* she was a lieutenant commander of the imperial fleet—despite her youth. Truly, a perfect superhuman. But peel back a layer or two, and she’s *actually* an awful alcoholic who easily gets jealous. I had to admit, the contrast was kind of hot.

But…Serena was a noblewoman: one high-class enough that I should probably be calling her “Lady.” I would be totally *trapped* if I got involved with her. If nothing else, I would have to say goodbye to my freedom as a mercenary. As such, I’ve been careful to keep things all business between us. No matter how vulnerable she made herself, I was totally hands-off.

“Incidentally,” Mei began, “the *Krishna* is a kind of ship that I have never seen.”

“Oh, yeah. It kinda has a wild history…”

“I wish to know more about you, Master,” Mei urged.

“Hmm…” How much could I tell her? I didn’t think I could give her a good explanation of where the *Krishna* came from. If I told her I’d just ended up here with it, she would think I was a total wack job. Besides, I was hesitant to tell her *everything* for many reasons. If machine intelligence was especially curious, then telling it more about myself would be particularly dangerous.

“Master, my information security may not be perfect, but it is extremely secure.”

“O-oh…?”

“I swear to you that my memories are mine and mine alone. I am naturally willing to engage in gossip, but your secrets will never find their way to anyone or anything other than myself.” Mei stared at me, obstinate willpower in her eyes.

If you want to keep a secret, then you need to keep the number of people who know about it to be as low as possible. *The more people who know, the higher the risk of it getting out. From that perspective, I shouldn't tell Mei.*

But whenever I got around to upgrading her with the body I'd designed, her capabilities for electronic and information warfare would drastically increase. Mei would be key to protecting info about the *Krishna*—and its crew. In that case, maybe it would be best for her to know. I just had to wonder if she would even believe me.

"To put it bluntly, I'm not a normal guy. There's a lot of stuff I don't even know about myself. But I think it would cause a lot of trouble if the truth about me got out, so I need you to keep what I'm about to say a secret."

"Yes. Thank you, Master. I will not speak a word of it."

"I sure hope not."

Mei looked at me solemnly—though she *did* have resting serious face—as I explained how I woke up in this universe: how I was in the cockpit of the powered-off *Krishna*. I told her about my perception of my origin, everything that had happened until Tarmein Prime, about my encounter with then-Lieutenant Serena, how this universe was just like *Stella Online*, how I met Elma and Mimi and registered as a mercenary, *and* about the fight in the Tarmein System.

"In short, you perceive this universe as the setting of a video game that you played in your world."

"That's what it feels like, but there are a lot of things I don't know from the game. For example, I didn't know of any Grakkan or Belbellum Empires. The Galaxy Map doesn't show any star systems I know of, either. But a lot of the ships and gear I've seen around are just like the ones from *Stella Online*."

"I see… Strange, indeed. Master, do you happen to know of simulation theory?"

"Simulation theory? Never heard of it." I raised an eyebrow at the unfamiliar phrase.

“The theory proposes that you, myself, nature, and all the rest of the universe are a computer simulation created by some sort of incredible technology.”

“That’s a scary theory. I bet some people would take that theory to the extreme and decide they can do whatever they want. I mean, what’s the meaning of life at that point?”

“Yes, you are quite correct. But… Does it not seem to coincide with your perspective?”

“Hmm…” I thought about it for a second. “It’d be a lie to say I’ve never felt like that before, but given my contact with Mimi and Elma, I can hardly imagine this universe being a simulation. I mean, my old planet’s technology was *way* inferior to this universe’s. Honestly…it sounds more likely that instead of somehow entering a video game universe, I came *out* of a video game or some other universe that’s simulated inside *this* one.”

It sounded more realistic to me that some super-advanced technological experiment or something had accidentally created me and the *Krishna* from a fake universe. But that meant that the gap between my self-awareness and reality would be a pretty big deal. Basically, I had no idea what to make of it.

“For real, though? I don’t think worrying about it is productive. Maybe if I went around begging people for help, we might eventually find the answer. But most people would probably think I was losing it, or worse. In my opinion, it’s best to just forget about my origins and enjoy my life as it is now.”

It had been a good strategy so far. I was glad that the mercenary guild existed, and especially glad that the *Krishna* had come here with me. Without the *Krishna*, I might’ve ended up even worse off than Mimi.

“Hmm…I see. If that is your decision, then I see no problem with it.”

“It might be a problem I have to confront someday, but today’s not that day… Hopefully.”

I had no pressing reason to return to my old world, after all. I was curious how people were reacting to my absence, but it wouldn’t exactly be easy to go back. I might have given it a try if I’d had a girlfriend or family,

but I had neither—fortunately, or otherwise. In fact, I much preferred being here with Mimi and Elma.

"Anyway, we've pretty much worn out that subject," I decided. "Any other questions?"

"In that case…"

Thus, I answered all of Mei's questions to help her gather data about me.

Chapter 2:
Ambush

THEN CAME THE THIRD DAY of guarding the private supply ship alongside Serena's Pirate-Hunting Unit.

"Your presence is making it awfully difficult to attract pirates," Serena complained.

"How is it *my* fault?! They're onto your bait strategy by now!" Either that, or they were so beaten up that they didn't have it in them to attack anymore.

"Impossible! I've just switched out the ship IDs and names."

"Jeez, she says that like it's nothing…" Elma chuckled.

"The power of the state is terrifying, indeed…" Mimi shuddered.

Ship IDs were unique identifiers given to each spaceship. No two ships had the same ID, and they were important to keep track of each ship's affiliation and the like, so you normally wouldn't change yours.

Keyword: *normally.*

Not that there weren't loopholes, of course. Almost every pirate out there used the ship ID of ships they had shot down. That made sense, given that the ships they used were basically souped-up ships that they had stolen. Anyway, changing your ship's ID meant that it would be treated as a *different ship.* Serena's claim that she had just changed the ships' IDs was a dangerous slip of the tongue—though I just ignored it, of course.

I noticed that Chris was suspiciously silent. I turned to see what was up, and she had closed her ears and zipped her lips. If this were a manga, her mouth would be in an X shape right now. As for what everyone else was doing…well, there wasn't much to do besides be on guard, so the girls were all on standby in the cockpit. Serena herself seemed bored as well, given that she wouldn't leave us alone. Apparently, fewer pirate attacks meant more paperwork for her, so she was cooped up in her cabin doing just that.

Serena was constantly bugging us—people who weren't even her coworkers—in order to blow off steam. I had to wonder about her workplace relationships. Was she a loner?

Mei, meanwhile, was cleaning the ship. We tried to keep our living space tidy, but she said that fine dust particles were collecting, so she had been cleaning whenever she had time over the past few days.

I finally answered. "Since we can't prove whether or not it's my fault that pirates aren't coming, let's just ignore that whole thing. Lieutenant Commander, how often do pirates show up in the Cierra System in general?"

"You also ignore things that *are* your fault," she said huffily. "Anyway, after that large battle the other day, sightings have been declin—" Before Serena could finish, alarms went off in the *Krishna*. It seemed our supply ship had been interdicted.

"Looks like the time has come," I smirked.

"We'll head your way immediately," Serena replied. "It will take about five minutes, as we've kept our distance. Hold on until then."

"Aye aye! Mimi, switch the radar to close-range battle mode and open comms with the *Pelican IV*. Elma, the defense systems are all yours. We'll be in battle as soon as we return to normal space."

"Understood."

"Okay, Boss."

I adjusted the *Krishna*'s thrusters and FTL drive to deal with the interdiction. The *Pelican IV* seemed to be trying to escape, but they wouldn't make it out that easily.

As I recall, interdictors worked by making an artificial gravity well, which would forcefully drag ships going faster than light back into normal speed. I remember reading in *Stella Online* that artificial gravity devices on ships were extremely powerful.

The interdicting side just had to keep the artificial gravity fixed on their target, while the ones being interdicted had to try to move their ship in all directions to escape it. A small, mobile ship like the *Krishna* could escape it, but not a large supply ship. The *Pelican IV* didn't stand a chance.

“This is the *Krishna*,” I hailed the other ship. “*Pelican IV*, respond.”

“*Pelican IV* here. We’re being interdicted by an unidentified ship of unknown affiliation. We’re trying to escape, but it isn’t going well.”

“End your FTL drive without resisting. That’ll make it easier to fight back, and it should be easier on your generator. Once you’re back in normal space, shift output to your shields. The cavalry will be there in five minutes.”

“Understood. Good luck in your fight. We will prepare for close combat.”

The *Pelican IV* had some of the Pirate-Hunting Unit’s own “naval” soldiers, so to speak (that was what the empire called face-to-face battle personnel stationed on ships), equipped with power armor and heavy arms. When the pirates boarded the ship to steal some loot, they would be greeted by burly, well-armed men. I almost felt bad for them.

“This is probably gonna be a fight,” I told the girls. “Everyone, make sure your seatbelts are on. Mei!” I opened a call with Mei, who was still cleaning.

“Yes?” she responded promptly.

“We’re about to go into battle. Stay safe back there, okay?”

“Yes, understood. Good luck, Master.”

“Thanks!” I wrapped up the conversation and checked the ship’s status again. Serena had resupplied our flak ammo, so everything was in tip-top shape. No way I’d lose to space pirates.

“*Pelican IV* has reduced their output. The number of unidentified ships is— *Huh*?!” Mimi gasped.

“Mimi, what’s wrong?”

“U-um, there are eleven ships in total, but…”

“But?” I urged.

“There’s one large… No, one *battleship* among them, along with two cruisers!”

“Oh. Oh, I see.”

When we referred to large ships on the radar, that would be equivalent to cruisers in terms of warships. Battleships would be even *bigger.* By the way, destroyers were somewhere between large ships and battleships, while corvettes were usually seen as medium.

"I've got a really bad feeling about this…" Elma groaned.

"Heh, same here. Once we get out, deploy chaffs and flares immediately. ECMs, too." I let out a dry laugh as the interdictor succeeded, dragging the *Krishna* into battle. At the same time, I brought the generator to maximum output and used the afterburners to accelerate sharply. "Would you look at that, folks?! A merciless surprise barrage!"

"This isn't funny!!!" Elma screamed.

"Eeeek!" Mimi shrieked alongside her.

Blood-red lasers pierced the space where the *Krishna* had just been. If not for my acceleration, they might've scored a direct hit on us. I disabled flight assist mode and activated the attitude control thrusters while maintaining our speed and vector, causing the *Krishna* to turn toward the battleship.

"They're outdated, but those are definitely the official ships of the imperial fleet," I noted. "The fleet sure has shoddy security, huh?"

It was obvious this was no normal pirate attack; pirates couldn't get their hands on *eleven* imperial ships. No doubt Balthazar had recruited them explicitly to help with killing Chris. These were just like the stealth dropships from the attack on Cierra III.

"Jeez, how brazen can they *be?!*" As Elma screamed, I activated the thrusters again and charged toward the battleship. Staying far away from a battleship would be a foolish plan; the further you were, the more likely they could just shoot you full of lasers.

This meant dealing with G-forces that even the *Krishna*'s inertia control device couldn't deal with, but we'd just have to grit our teeth and bear it. Elma and I were mostly fine, but it was rough for Mimi and Chris. *Especially* Chris.

"Uuuurk!" There was a pained groan behind me, but unfortunately, I couldn't help Chris right now.

The *Krishna*'s shields were strong, but not enough to deal with the enemy's high-powered, large-bore laser cannons. If we took a few hits from those, our shields would be gone in an instant.

"What are you doing?!" Elma demanded.

"What else can I do but *fight*?!"

The fastest way to take down the battleship would be to charge in and use our reactive torpedoes, but that wasn't a good idea at this stage. However, there was a trick to fighting an overwhelming enemy force that had a large ship in their midst.

I tried to circle around to the blind spot of the enemy battleship, dodging a hail of defensive fire as I went. But it swiftly used its attitude control thrusters in an attempt to thwart my attack. Cruisers and other enemy ships tried to back it up, but they were too late.

"Aw, heck yeah!" I slipped past the bridge of the whirling battleship and used the attitude control thrusters to change direction once again. Once I was directly behind the ship in its blind spot, I stuck right to it. Now their friends would stop using strong weapons for fear of missing and hitting the battleship.

Basically, the battleship became a *huge* shield for me. Or a hostage, you could say. Fighting fair and square would mean being crushed in ten seconds flat, so I had to use the attackers against each other. Sure, I fought dirty, but I didn't care. These battles weren't honorable affairs.

A fight to the death doesn't come with rules.

"Small ships and carriers are coming around!" Mimi announced.

"All planned for. Don't worry." Their only way of getting rid of me was to send other ships to fight me.

But fighting those ships was me and the *Krishna*'s specialty. I held on like a parasite to the battleship behind us as it tried to get away, crushing the small craft and carriers with my four heavy lasers and two flak cannons. Just like shooting fish in a barrel.

"Huh? Wh-what's going on?" Chris asked, utterly confused by the *Krishna*'s movements.

“He’s using back thrusters and control thrusters to stick to the battleship while he fights. I can’t explain how, though.” Mimi told her what she could about it, sounding awfully proud for some reason.

“You still move like a weirdo,” Elma complained.

Hey, I’m not weird! I’m just using the radar and HUD at the same time to predict the enemy’s movements and controlling the thrusters to follow suit… Not that I have time to explain it now.

I began to hear enemy communications.

“H-he won’t back off! Shoot him down already!”

“What’s with those creepy movements? How can he spin like that and still stay next to the ship?!”

“Damn it! Fighter III is down! He’s stronger than we thought!”

Why were they using the shared frequency of the imperial fleet? Were they soldiers? *Hey, hold on! I thought they just had shoddy security, but no! They’re soldiers! Did Chris’ uncle bribe them? Who are these people?!*

The enemy continued to yell at each other.

“Argh! Are we losing?!”

“I’m in a corvette, damn it! How did a tiny ship like that get to be stronger than cruisers?!”

Having grown tired of taking so much damage from a small ship, a corvette—a medium ship, by merc standards—came flying at the *Krishna*. But even its shields and armor couldn’t stand up to my full power. It lost its shields almost instantly and took heavy damage to its plating and hull before limping away pitifully.

After a few minutes of us being stuck in a defensive deadlock, the Pirate-Hunting Unit finally appeared, led by the battleship *Lestarius*. Their flagship vessel was followed by five cruisers, three destroyers, and two corvettes. They all boomed as they warped out into regular space. Actually, does it even count as “warping” out if you’re just turning off their faster-than-light drive?

At any rate, the cavalry was here!

“Attention, all imperial ships present!” Serena’s voice boomed powerfully. “We are the imperial fleet’s own Pirate-Hunting Unit, and I am their commander, Lieutenant Commander Serena Holz! Your hostile acts flagrantly violate the imperial code! Cease fire at once and stop your engines!”

With Serena’s arrival, you’d think that silence would fall over this sector of space, but no such luck.

“Uh, Serena…? They’re not stopping at all.”

The battleship continued to spin around toward the *Krishna*, and the remaining small craft and carrier ships still tried desperately to peel me off of it.

“I repeat!” She yelled this time, the rage obvious in her voice. “Cease fire at once and *stop your engines!!!* Your actions go wildly against imperial laws and code! If you do not obey at once, then in accordance with article six, paragraph three of imperial law, I *will* shoot you down! *Stop immediately*!!!”

But they didn’t stop. Instead, they totally ignored the *Pelican IV* and focused all their attention on the *Krishna*. It was obvious what they wanted.

“Think they’ll stop?” Elma asked.

“I really doubt it.”

“Do you…?” Mimi sounded worried.

“They clearly want me,” Chris said quietly. “I don’t know what kind of connections my uncle has, or what methods he used to send them after us, but they won’t back down now.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off the battle, so I couldn’t see the look on her face, but her tone was solemn. No doubt her adorable face was clouded over with sadness. Her uncle was an awful man; that much was clear.

“Don’t worry about damaging the *Westall*,” the enemy declared. “Weapons free!”

“Understood. Weapons free!”

There was a shrill warning noise in the *Krishna*’s cockpit. At the same time, countless missiles shot from the enemy’s remaining ships.

“Weapons free” is basically an order to use all your weapons on the enemy. In other words, the guy was telling his friends to use everything they had to take down the *Krishna*, even if it meant hurting the battleship next to me.

“Are they *insane*?!” I yelled.

“Seeker missiles are coming this way!” Elma announced.

“Weapons free! Take down those deserters! *Open fire*!!!” Having decided that enough was enough, Serena ordered her unit to attack.

At this point, we couldn’t stick to the battleship anymore; after all, they were going to fire indiscriminately now. Hell, we’d go down before the battleship would.

“*Nnnngh!* Damn you!” I gave up on staying glued to the enemy, accelerating hard and plunging into the hail of missiles.

“Urk!!!”

“Eep!!!”

“Ugh!!!”

Elma, Mimi, and Chris responded with a chorus of gasps and screams. At the same time, I fired my flak cannons, destroying the heat-seeking missiles coming my way and flying straight into the resulting explosion.

“Sweet! Perfect maneuvering!” I congratulated myself.

The missiles that hadn’t been destroyed were confused the moment we plunged into the blast, flying off in different directions. Elma must have used the flares right as we went in, since several of the missiles were guided toward them. What a goddess!

But we weren’t out of danger yet. We were heading straight toward enemy ships, and they were training their large laser cannons on us in this very moment.

“Chaffs!” I demanded.

“I know!” Elma replied, already on the case.

We deployed chaffs to interfere with their laser lock-ons and took evasive maneuvers, but because we were charging in, it was impossible to

avoid them completely. Alarms rang out in the cockpit, and the shields started to go pale and flicker. Military-grade ships—and cruiser-rank ones, at that—were just built differently. The *Krishna*'s shields couldn't take that much punishment.

"O-our shields!" Mimi screamed.

"Don't worry. It's not time to panic yet."

"You're awfully calm!!!"

I managed to soothe Mimi while sticking to one of the enemy cruisers. At the same time, countless lasers tore through space near us. The enemy battleship must have finally turned around and trained their large-bore lasers on the *Krishna*.

"Okay," I grumbled. "I've had my fill of thrills."

"Just so you know, I think you're a total idiot."

"If that had hit us, we…" Mimi shuddered.

"It's cool, it's cool. All according to plan."

Okay, so that was a *big* lie. Our shields were almost exhausted, so if that barrage had hit us, we would be in serious trouble. It wouldn't destroy us outright, but we'd have taken heavy damage. Fortunately, the *Krishna* was equipped with high-grade plating, so it could take at least one shot from a battleship's main cannon. Let me tell you, that shiz was *expensive*.

As I reminisced about the good old days of *Stella Online* while evading enemy fire, I realized that a volley of lasers had just hit the cruiser I was using to shield myself.

"Damn it!" Putting the pedal to the metal, I fled from the explosion. The other ships tried to shoot us down, but the *Krishna* was long gone: they only managed to hit their own allies. Since the enemy was focusing their main cannons on the *Krishna*, they had left their flanks and underbellies exposed to attack by Serena's unit.

"One shot grazed us!" Elma informed me.

"That's what we get for hanging out near their target."

"They would have shot us down at the start if we *hadn't*."

The Pirate-Hunting Unit, with its newer and more plentiful vessels, took down ship after ship. Some suffered engine failure, others had their propulsion systems destroyed, and others had their upper deck—where their main weapons were installed—badly damaged.

The destroyers and corvettes already seemed to be wrecked, so only their battleship could fight at this point.

"Good grief… Guess the battle's over, huh?"

Amidst all of this, I had hidden us behind one of the cruisers that'd lost its propulsion system. We still had to be careful, since the enemy battleship could still target us.

"Are you sure we should be hiding?" Mimi asked.

"At this stage, there's no point in taking unnecessary risks," I answered.

"Yep," Elma agreed.

Only an idiot would leap out and be like, "*I'm Captain Hiro, and I challenge you to single combat!"* Guaranteed I'd just get shot down by their large-bore lasers.

Besides, the people who attacked us seemed to be from the imperial fleet, so it was a little too risky to attack them aside from pure self-defense. I had a friend here, sure, but she had plenty of soldiers with her. If we weren't careful, it was totally possible that we could be arrested.

So, I kept my reactive torpedoes to myself and didn't even attack the cruiser I was hiding behind, only shooting down the small craft that actively came for us. If Serena's unit hadn't been coming to help, I would have been much more aggressive. To be fair, though, the *Krishna* wouldn't have made it through things unscathed. We might've even gotten shot down, seeing as we almost lost our shields this time.

Truly, organized space fleets were terrifying.

"I repeat, stop your engine!!!" Serena continued, utterly furious. "The battle is *over*! Any more sacrifices would be utterly *meaningless*!"

After a moment of silence, the enemy battleship stopped its engine.

“This is the vice-captain of the *Westall*, Lieutenant Commander Romando Kestrel,” the enemy replied. “We have stopped our engine, and we await further orders.”

“Good. Where’s your captain?”

“Captain Eugene Herasmus has committed suicide. I am now in command of this ship.”

“I see,” Serena sighed. “We’ll begin rescuing the wounded now. Prepare to receive us.”

“Aye aye.”

I have no idea how or why they sicced imperial soldiers on us, but it seemed the battle was finally over. The battleship *Westall* received Serena’s *Lestarius*, and ships from the Pirate-Hunting Unit joined the immobile enemy cruisers. From this point on, they would commandeer the enemy ships.

Suicide, though? I pondered. *That’s suspicious.*

“Is it over?” Mimi asked.

“Looks like it,” Elma replied. “We should still be careful, though.”

“Agreed. They might restart their engines for a surprise attack. Let’s wait and watch a bit before we go back to the *Pelican IV*.” With that, I grabbed my gravity sphere and sipped some well-chilled, non-carbonated soda. *Ah… I can feel its sweetness spreading through my tense, tired body.*

I would have preferred the carbonated stuff, but it was back in the cargo bay. I couldn’t open it up on the *Krishna* because of air pressure or artificial gravity or something like that. If I did, it would explode all over the ship and my crew.

“Mei, are you okay?” I asked.

“Yes. My functions are normal, and I am undamaged.”

“Awesome. The battle’s pretty much over but be ready for anything until we dock on the *Pelican IV*.”

“Understood.”

Now, all we had to do was wait. It wouldn’t take long for Serena to commandeer those enemy ships.

Chapter 3:
A City of Androids

OKAY, SO IT DID take a little while for Serena to commandeer their ships. I mean, the battleship was *huge*, and they had to prepare to tow the other immobile ships, so we wouldn't be able to leave for a bit. Since we weren't needed to help with that, we were on standby in the *Pelican IV's* hangar.

The attacks on us were over, and the Pirate-Hunting Unit had safely brought the deserters back to Cierra Prime. The unit and the *Pelican IV* all had to go through admin procedures and resupplying, so we were free from guard duty for a while. We earned 80,000 Ener a day, making for a total of 240,000 Ener over the past three days.

"Do I get a bounty?" I asked expectantly.

"They weren't pirates, so…" Serena offered me a big smile, reaffirming that there was no bounty on the defected imperial soldiers.

Don't think you've won yet, I thought. *Not that I can do anything about it. You're the boss, after all.*

Also, while we were on standby, we were questioned by Serena's unit's military policemen. Fortunately, we weren't in any trouble. After all, the recorders aboard the *Krishna* and *Pelican IV* made it very clear that the enemy fired first, without warning.

In fact, the cops were horrified by my battle maneuvers. "How the *hell* did you do that?" one of them asked. "That was so messed up!" I wouldn't forget that insult anytime soon.

Anyway, here we are, standing by on Cierra Prime.

At present, we were waiting for a reply from Chris' grandfather in order to get her home safe and sound. Going back to the resort planet would be an option, but it was about time for him to contact us, so we decided to stay on Cierra Prime.

“Off we go, then,” I announced. Mei and I were just about to head out of the *Krishna* together.

As long as we were here, I figured it was a good time to have Mei’s upgrade installed. We’d already paid for it, after all. Her manufacturer, Oriental Industries, had a branch office with a workshop on the colony. I had to wonder if they had ready access to the necessary materials, but everyone who visited Cierra Prime was rich, so high-end android parts and the equipment needed for them were all very available.

“I figure he’ll be fine, but Mei…” Elma sighed. “If the going gets tough, you’d better protect him.”

“Of course. You can trust me.” Mei readily accepted the ridiculous request.

“Can you even fight?” I asked. “We haven’t customized you yet, so…”

“Customized or not, we androids are made with parameters that exceed humans in both speed and power.”

“For real?”

“Yes. I am one-point-five to two times stronger than a human.” Still expressionless, Mei raised her fists and flexed. Her arms looked scrawnier than mine, but I doubted she would lie, so I had to trust her there.

“Please be careful,” Mimi said.

“My uncle’s men may still be hiding in ambush, so take care,” Chris added.

“Yeah, don’t worry. See you later!” I said goodbye to the girls as we left the *Krishna*.

Our food and water problems were easily solved by resupplying through Serena, so if we wanted, we could hole up in the *Krishna* for a month straight. Safety-wise, getting her help was a huge deal. I just didn’t want to rely on her too much in case she started making impossible demands later.

“Can you guide me there?” I asked Mei.

“Yes. Leave it to me,” Mei replied, leading me from the port district and onto the elevator, which we took to the district that housed the workshop. She almost seemed to be enjoying herself. It was a subtle change, but there was a little pep in her step. Maybe it was my imagination, but it made me feel good.

After a little while, we arrived at our destination. Except…

“Oh, jeez…” I groaned.

“Hm?” Mei cocked her head.

Maybe this sight was normal to her, so she wouldn’t understand. “Degenerate” wasn’t quite the word I was looking for. To put it bluntly, the place seemed a little bit *decadent.*

Female androids—I guess you could call them femdroids—were *everywhere*. Like, all over the place. Show windows were full of androids resembling women and little girls. Male-coded androids were a shockingly rare sight.

They ranged from adorably delicate to thicc and voluptuous. Some of them were even pole-dancing in revealing clothing, as if to demonstrate their potential possibilities. Deep in the back alleys, I could see some attractive androids trying to reel in customers. I could only imagine that there are android-run brothels out there.

Of course, female androids weren’t the only ones here. Human men were naturally all over the place, and there were a few women as well. Next to them walked little…girls? Boys? *Actually, I don’t care, and I’m going to need some brain bleach after this*, I thought to myself.

“Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no. Don’t worry about it.”

Mei was confused by my reaction, but she wouldn’t have understood my problem anyway. This sight must have been like a hometown to her—like childhood. To these girls, this was where they would meet their new master and leave their homes for the first time.

We crossed the city of androids together, Mei making a strange face all the way, and arrived at the district full of android manufacturers’ offices and workshops. Things seemed a little less skeevy now. Only a *little*,

though, because each office had holo-display ads in front of the entrance showing off their *newest models* (little girl androids) and *hot sellers* (bombshell women). They didn't even *censor* them!

"Um, are we almost there?" I asked, worried that I'd be arrested any second now.

"Yes. I can already see it." Mei pointed at a building with the company name written in huge type. I thought it was an office, but it seemed to be a workshop. It was more than three times the size of the other workshops.

"It's huge…"

"Oriental Industries holds the greatest market share of all android manufacturers in the Cierra System."

"No kidding!" With greater market share, you'd naturally have more androids out there, leading to increased need for maintenance.

Mei led me into the Oriental Industries workshop. There, a woman at the reception desk looked our way. Looking closely, she wasn't *actually* a flesh and blood woman; she seemed to be an android, too.

"Come right in! Welcome to the official workshop of Oriental Industries! Today is Mei's upgrade, correct? Come right this way!" She discerned what we needed before I even said anything and smiled with boundless cheer. As soon as she got up from her seat, another android came up to take her place. "We androids have no need for words between us," she explained.

"Interesting." That made sense. They must use a data-sharing method that was imperceptible to humans. Two androids exchanging words would be nothing more than a waste of time and effort.

We were taken to what looked like a coffee shop, but there were no other customers except for us.

"What's up with this place?" I asked.

"While your partner is being upgraded, you're free to relax here! We'd be delighted to bring you refreshments any time."

"Oh?"

“I’ll go and get straight to work on my upgrade,” Mei said. “Please take care of my master in my absence.”

“Yes, gladly!”

Mei bowed and walked away. After seeing her off, I decided standing around would be weird and sat at the counter, where I would wait for her to finish her upgrade.

“Would you like a drink?”

“Hmm… How about some cold tea, or something?”

“Understood!” The receptionist bowed and slipped behind the counter. She was an android too, but she was much bubblier. I had set Mei’s emotionality near the minimum, so she was cool and expressionless. Was this girl set nearly to the max? I couldn’t figure it out. “And here you are!”

“Thanks. How long does the upgrade take?”

“In Mei’s case, it’s less of an upgrade and more of a remodel, so I doubt it will take that long.”

“Remodel?”

“Yes! For example, having her muscle fibers changed out, replacing worn joints, and other light maintenance work make for normal upgrades. But in Mei’s case, everything from her frame to her muscle fibers and central processor will be switched out. All things considered, it’s faster to just remake her body from the ground up and then migrate her data.”

“Huh…”

I supposed it was just like a computer upgrade. If you were going to switch out memory and CPU coolers and the like, then it might be faster to just replace the whole thing—motherboard, CPU, and power unit alike—creating a new PC altogether and just transferring the data. I don’t get it myself, but I guess if that’s what the pros say, then it must be true.

“It should take around two hours. If you’d like, I can give you advice on your future life with Mei!”

“Hey, that sounds great. Go for it!”

Throughout the entire two-hour wait, the receptionist android lectured me on simple maintenance, necessary equipment for maintenance

and other stuff, and who to call and what to do when there were problems.

My wallet suffered a little as a result, but I decided to just call it the cost of learning… even if it felt like I was taken for a ride.

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"You don't look very different." I cocked my head at Mei when she returned. The main changes were a new frame and muscles, a new power source, and a positronic brain, so maybe it was natural that she wouldn't look different on the outside.

"Correct. My appearance was not changed. Should we alter it?"

"Nope, you're fine as you are." I shook my head vigorously. She might not have looked any different, but now, Mei was a Maidroid more powerful than any regular battle robot. She could stand toe-to-toe with me in power armor, as long as she had a proper weapon.

"Also, the upgrade has made me able to perform certain services."

"Certain 'services'…?"

"Yes. I have been fitted with a taste sensor and installed with a cooking program, so I will be able to cook foods that cannot be made with automatic cookers. Also, I have a fine sense of touch, so I can give intricate massages of all kinds."

"Massages are nice. Maybe I'll ask for one after I work out."

"Yes." Mei nodded to me.

Not that I should have to say it by now, but Mei had functions used for…*stuff*. It might sound like an exaggeration, but those functions were actually a major factor in a machine intelligence's identity.

Ugh. I needed to get my mind back out of the gutter.

"Take good care of her!" The receptionist said, strangely emotional.

"Oh, yeah. I guess!" I was at a loss for what to say. To the girls, this was like their first departure into the real world—something worth

congratulating. But from my perspective, I was just taking home a maid with whom I could do whatever I wanted.

I just felt kind of guilty. I was about to take this maid back to the girls who I loved and made love to. It weighed heavily on my mind.

I mean, I didn't buy Mei just for *that*. She was a fantastic bodyguard, and her mental functions—which went way beyond human limits—would be an important part of our future information warfare. If you considered her a secretary who's also really good at fighting, then I'd say Mei was a bargain.

So why should I feel guilty? I shouldn't…right?

I silently looked to Mei again, taking in her appearance: long, glossy black hair. Black eyes like obsidian behind her red-rimmed glasses. Expressionless, but in a way that only accentuated her lovely features. A white maid's brim on her head, the perfect Victorian maid attire, and two voluptuous breasts. Mei was truly a graceful beauty.

"Yes?" Finding my staring strange, Mei cocked her head again. Maybe it was a calculated action; every single one of her actions seemed to be picture-perfect. She had the inexplicable power to draw my total attention without my even knowing.

"Sorry, don't mind me. It's just… You don't look any different, but you seem to have so much more…presence."

"Perhaps you can sense my increased strength?" Mei raised her right fist and flexed again. Did she like doing that? The incongruity between her cool appearance and silly actions was kind of cute.

"U-umm…" I stammered. "Oh, right!!! We ordered some weapons for you, too. How exactly does that work?"

"Would you like to see them?"

"Yes, please," I agreed, prompting Mei to show me a black orb. "What is that, some sort of grenade?" I asked.

"This is high-density metal used in ship plating. When thrown with my strength, it can pierce through standard power armor and deal fatal damage to the person within. I am also able to hold back by varying my throwing speed."

“Whoa… scary.”

Mei then pulled a forty-centimeter-long black metal pole out of nowhere. It was plain, but damn if it didn’t look sturdy. “And this is a self-defense baton made with the same material. When swung with my strength, it can shatter standard power armor and damage the person within as well.”

Why did she bring up power armor every time? Were AIs just naturally competitive? Did she actually feel jealous of power armor—a machine that wasn’t even sentient?

Mei showed off a few of her personal weapons, all of which were primitive, brute-force objects. It seemed she had a preference for close combat.

She went on to explain things further. “The *Krishna* has more than enough optical weapons, so I decided that I should bolster our close-range capabilities.”

“Fair enough.” The cargo hold was already full of stuff like laser rifles and laser launchers. Mei preferred weapons she could conceal.

“We’ll deliver everything to your ship by the end of the day!” The receptionist beamed.

“Okay, thanks.” I found myself getting tired while I looked over Mei’s melee weapons.

“Finally, let’s take care of the fitting!”

I blinked. “The fitting…?”

“Yes! We need you to see—and *feel*—that everything is to your specifications. With the deal as it is, we wouldn’t want you realizing that things are all wrong later!” The receptionist made a tight circle with her thumb and index fingers, then began to thrust her other index finger in and out of the circle.

“Oh, come *on*!!!” I exclaimed, embarrassed.

The android looked confused by this. “It’s important, you know.”

“C’mon, *seriously*. Who would just agree to that on the spot?!”

“About ninety percent of customers agree to it. That’s what we’re here for, after all!”

“That’s way too many! Looking at me blankly won’t make me say yes, either!”

“Still, you must not be against it. Riiight?” The receptionist, who was nothing but bubbly up to this point, now offered a devious grin. *You’re right about that!,* I thought. “Either way… Mei, rules are rules.”

“Yes.” Mei clung to my arm and began pulling me. *Ooh, I like that feeling… Damn, you’re strong! Way too strong! I’m trying to hold my ground, but I’m still getting dragged down!*

“Hold up,” I protested. “Mei, calm down for a sec. Mimi and the others are waiting on the ship!”

“Are you truly so against it?” Mei looked at me sadly.

Wait, wait, wait! This is against the rules of war! You can’t put your emotions on your face like that. I set your emotionality to almost zero!!!

“No…” I sighed. I knew when to admit I’d lost a battle.

“Then that settles it.” Mei went back to her usual deadpan look and started pulling again.

Wait a second. When I said we were going to upgrade Mei, did Mimi and Elma not come with me because they knew this would happen? It’s possible that’s the case. Does that mean they consented to this? Yeah, that’s gotta be it. I’m gonna run on that assumption. Okay, I’m ready! What will this maid machine do to service me?! I’m ready for battle!

***

“Have a nice life!” The receptionist android waved to us with the biggest smile.

A nice life? Huh… Is being bought like getting married for these girls? Does that make customization and the purchase price like a reverse dowry or something?

...Actually, I’m just gonna stop thinking about it.

“Hm?” Mei cocked her head again. She walked a bit closer to me after our experience at the workshop. If I reached out, I could touch her soft

hand. “Is something the matter?”

“Nope,” I answered. “Nothing at all.”

She smiled almost imperceptibly. Seeing this, I couldn’t help but blush. She’d been awesome. Like…*awesome* awesome. So awesome that it ruined my vocabulary. I won’t go into specifics, but basically, it was like we fit together perfectly. It was a truly transcendental experience.

We returned to the *Krishna* with some pep in our step. When we arrived, strangely, there were macho men with laser rifles guarding the door. Their weapons didn’t seem to be military-issue, but considering their uniforms and armor matched, they must have been soldiers of some organization.

“They’re Count Dalenwald’s personal soldiers,” Mei explained. “Perhaps he placed them there for security.”

“Say what?! Does that mean Chris’ grandfather is here?”

“Yes. He arrived while we were testing our fitting. As we weren’t able to return to the *Krishna* immediately, we can simply explain that we were out procuring security equipment.”

“S-sure.”

Fitting, huh? Ha ha ha! That’s a fitting *word, isn’t it?* Though to be fair, the bit about security equipment wasn’t a lie.

“So how should we contact him?” I asked.

“You received a message on your terminal, to which I replied and requested that Mimi and Elma let him know.”

“Oh, cool.”

Asking her how she accessed my terminal would be a waste of time. Mei was a perfect machine intelligence, complete with a positronic brain. She had great fighting abilities, too. Part of me wanted to just leave all the work to her, but that was the path to depravity.

I won’t fall to machine-wrought depravity, damn it! I solemnly swore as we approached the *Krishna*, where the soldiers were clearly wary of us. They were whispering something into their headsets, too. Were they calling for reinforcements? *Guys, it’s* my *ship.*

“Halt!” one commanded. “Not another step.”

“Whatever you say, my guy. Just don’t burn me to a crisp with that laser rifle.” I stopped as directed. It wouldn’t take long to prove that this was my ship, so why kick up a fuss? They were likely subordinates of Chris’ grandfather, anyway. Mei was totally calm as well. If they were actually sent by Chris’ *uncle*, though, she would have them detained in an instant.

“Confirmation received. Captain Hiro, yes?”

“Yep. You guys are from Count Dalenwald’s estate, right?”

“That is correct. We were dispatched to protect Lady Christina.”

“I see. Can I go in now?”

“Of course.” The two guards cleared the way, so I climbed up the ladder and entered the *Krishna*. I was a little worried that they’d shoot me from behind, but they did not. You can never be too sure, after all.

We all reunited in the cafeteria. To put it bluntly, the mood was not good.

Mimi clung to Chris, not even looking my way. Elma’s eyes were glued to her own terminal. Meanwhile, Chris looked to be in a daze. Was this because I went out alone with Mei to Oriental Industries and “fitted” with her? Or was it because Count Dalenwald contacted them, I wasn’t there, and I didn’t answer them because I was too busy with the fitting? Or maybe it was both?

Yeah, probably both. But I won’t apologize! “I’m home!” I announced.

“Tch!”

Okay, well never mind. “I’m sorry!” A single click of Elma’s tongue was all it took to make me get on the floor and beg. It was my fault for not answering her messages, anyway. It was mostly because of Mei coming on to me, but it felt wrong to blame her entirely.

“I apologize. This is my fault, too.” Mei got on her knees next to me and bowed in apology. Seeing us, Elma scratched her head guiltily.

“Sorry, um…I didn’t mean to come at you that hard. I just wanted to make him squirm a little.” She stood up and squatted next to us, apologizing back.

“Are you sure you’re not angry?” Mei asked.

“I’m not angry. Besides, I just wanted to mess with Hiro, not you. You’ve done nothing wrong, Mei.”

“Thank you,” Mei replied.

Elma took Mei’s hand and helped her up. As I got up, Elma reached out and slapped me right upside the head.

“And *you* should think about what you’ve done! Nobility had to wait on you.”

“Okay.” I agreed meekly and stood up. “So, what’s wrong with Mimi?”

“Remember how I said in my messages that Chris’ grandfather was here? And how she was going to move to his ship? Mimi’s feeling lonely since they won’t be sleeping together anymore.” On closer inspection, Chris’ eyes looked a little red, too. She seemed almost motherly with the way she patted Mimi’s head with her own little hand.

“Oooh, right,” I replied. “What’s happening with all that?”

“You didn’t read my messages at all, did you?!”

“I’m very sorry.” I bowed my head again. *So much happened that my mind is still fuzzy. Please forgive me.*

After a sigh, Elma explained, “He contacted us through the mercenary guild. He said he wanted to see Chris, but you and Mei weren’t here. We weren’t totally comfortable without you even though he sent bodyguards, so we asked him to wait until you got back. He and Chris already talked over video chat, so there probably won’t be any problems, but we can’t make decisions without the captain here.”

“Fair enough. Gotcha.” I was both the ship’s owner and its captain. Nobility or not, it would be a little problematic for Elma to decide on her own to hand over our guest. “So did you tell him I’d contact him when I got back?”

“Yup. You’re gonna have to talk face to face with nobility. Are you ready for that?”

“What do you mean?”

“The way you talk. The count’s a born noble, so you can’t talk to him like that trashy lieutenant commander.”

“I can’t?”

“You absolutely *cannot.*”

Well, that was annoying. While I wondered how I would deal with this, Mei raised her hand timidly. “If you’d like, I can interfere with your holo-display and create the perfect responses.”

“Mmm, I dunno if I want to totally rely on you like that. Let’s try it my way first. If that doesn’t work, you two can jump in and help.”

“Whatever you say, Boss.”

“Yes, Master.”

Having gotten their consent, I turned to Chris and Mimi. “There you have it! I know it hurts, but let’s head to the cockpit. It has the biggest holo-display, and it’s made for video calls anyway.”

“Mimi…” Chris said softly.

“Aww…” Mimi reluctantly released Chris, tears still in her eyes. At least she wasn’t spewing snot everywhere. I’d have just looked away if she had been.

“You two can rinse your faces and come to the cockpit,” I told them. “Elma and Mei, come with me. Mei will stand behind me just in case anything crazy happens.”

“Gotcha.”

“Yes, Master.”

With that, I nodded to the girls and headed for the cockpit.

Chapter 4:
Encounter with the Count

WE WERE TENSE going into the call, but it was actually pretty darn easy.

"We will send someone to meet you in fifteen minutes," the secretary informed me. "At that time, please board the ship with them."

I had prepared to be formal, but in the end, I just had to make an appointment with the count through his secretary.

"Maybe he doesn't want your first meeting to be over the phone?" Elma suggested.

"Could that be it?" Mimi wondered.

"Hmm. I'm not sure, myself." Chris was just as stumped.

All three of them were just as confused. Mei offered no comment and just stood politely with her hands clasped in front of her. Ever since her upgrade, she seemed much more refined. Was it Mei who'd changed, or just the way I saw her?

We took a moment for Chris to confirm that the secretary we spoke with did indeed work with Count Dalenwald. In an overabundance of caution, we also decided to do a little information digging. We couldn't find any info on the secretary, but we did find out that several of Count Dalenwald's ships were docked at Cierra Prime. And they weren't just transport or passenger ships; they had battleships here.

It seemed Chris' grandfather, Count Abraham Dalenwald himself, was being awfully cautious of his son Balthazar.

"Well, I think we can trust that we're dealing with Chris' grandfather now," I decided. "I doubt it's one of her uncle's traps, anyway."

"Yes," Chris answered. "I think it's fine, too. I recognized the secretary, after all."

"Still, be careful, all right?" Elma reminded me.

“Agreed,” said Mei. “Even if Count Dalenwald himself is here, that doesn’t perfectly guarantee Lady Christina’s safety.”

Mimi just cocked her head with her brow furrowed, unsure of what to say.

“Anyway, it’s time, so let’s get going. Be sure to bring your laser guns. That means you too, Mimi.”

“Okay!” Mimi answered, patting the holster at her hip. I needed to get her more used to firing that gun, at least to the point where she could hit stationary targets. *Maybe it’s time to go back to the range…*

When we went down the *Krishna*’s ladder, the men standing guard quietly saluted Chris. She thanked them, prompting them both to respond emotionally.

“You waste your lovely words on us, Lady Christina!”

“We will protect you even at the cost of our lives!”

Man, this universe just makes no sense to me.

“It really is sinking in that you’re an honest-to-goodness noblewoman, Chris,” Mimi mused.

“Aww, don’t exaggerate.” Chris smiled to herself at Mimi’s admiration. It was then that a high-class vehicle, akin to a Joop, stopped in front of us. *This must be one of those RVs.*

Speaking of RVs, that abbreviation stood for “recreational vehicle” on Earth, but here, it stands for “reconnaissance vehicle.” They’re special vehicles used to search unexplored planets. Small though they may be, they had firepower and shields greater than those of power armor.

Unfortunately, there was no RV on the *Krishna*. To be fair though, there’s not much use for them in mercenary work. However, RVs are a necessity for explorers—people who search undiscovered planets and search for relics of alien civilizations to sell. Putting an RV on the *Krishna*, along with its loading device, would fill up the cargo bay almost completely.

We all got into the RV, including the burly guards, and went through the port district at high speed. The place was as busy as ever. There were port workers wearing power armor and loading cargo, rich-looking families

who came to sightsee, mercs like us, and unfamiliar aliens. Merchants, maybe? Anyway, a whole lot of people were walking around.

That included imperial soldiers, naturally. *Oh! That blonde over there must be Serena. I hope she doesn't notice me staring at—whoops. She looked right at me. How did she know? I'd better lock the door.*

The RV rattled to a stop in a district full of pretentious-looking ships. They weren't quite cutting-edge, but they came close. When you see units like this, you can really see their commander's quirks. In this case, their commander liked to fight prudently. The fast front-liners were equipped to specialize in ambush and defense while the back line was made up of battleships that emphasized firepower. Their flagship was large and visibly sturdy, emphasizing leadership and survivability. It'd be a *little* tough for the *Krishna* to go up against a unit like this.

We entered their flagship's hangar and got out of the RV where we saw a woman resembling Mei waiting for us—Count Dalenwald's secretary from before. "Apologies for the wait," she politely greeted us. "Lady Christina, we have been praying for your safety. It is good to see you here with us again!"

On closer inspection, the people working there were dressed as butlers and maids. *The count certainly is an…eccentric guy.*

"It's all thanks to my mother, father, and Captain Hiro here. Where is my grandfather?"

"He is waiting in his room. Come with me. Others will guide Captain Hiro and his crew."

An intelligent-looking maid called for us to follow her. "Please, come this way. I will take you to the reception room."

Should I leave Chris alone? I glanced at her, to which she responded with a nod. I had no reason to worry, then. I also looked to Elma, and she reacted the same way. *So we're in the clear.*

"Got it," I agreed. "See you later, Chris."

"Later, Hiro." I waved to Chris and joined Mimi, Elma, and Mei on the walk to the reception room.

It didn't take long for me to notice that this ship's decorations were incredibly elaborate. Elma said the *Krishna* was furnished as well as a passenger ship, but this ship looked even better. It appeared like a true battleship on the outside, but on the inside, it was like a five-star hotel—or a noble's mansion. I guess that's to be expected from a count's ship.

The ship served as the flagship of Count Dalenwald's own army, a spacefaring home away from home, and maybe even a VIP guesthouse. That would explain the crew's attire. *What a free way of thinking...*

"Why are you looking around so much?" Elma asked.

"Sorry. I just never would've thought of *this*."

"Isn't the *Krishna* just like it?"

"How so?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Well, you've got furniture that increases quality of life, and you have a Maidroid. This is the same thing, just taken to its logical extreme."

"Really…?" Maybe she was right. I mean, if you wanted to get a home for yourself, buying a big mothership with high livability was one method. It wasn't *cheap* by any means, but it was cheaper than buying landowner rights from the empire plus land on a planet.

Besides, with a ship this big, you could earn a lot of money by transporting cargo. You would have a lot of options, in general. Slow and steady wins the race, so maybe looking into my own mothership wouldn't be a bad idea. I'd thought the *Krishna* was too big for one person at first, but honestly, it was starting to get cramped.

Not that I was planning to get any more crew members. *Seriously, I mean it!*

"It's like a nobleman's mansion. It's making me nervous…" Mimi was visibly uncomfortable.

"I know how you feel, Mimi," I agreed. "But isn't this place nice? If it were fancier, I'd kind of flinch away from things because it would seem like it belonged a person who just came into money. But it's not *too* fancy, so it doesn't feel that way at all."

"That is true, but the atmosphere is just…you know…"

“Yeah. I know it’s not your thing.”

Despite her appearance, Mimi’s aesthetic sense tended toward a more “punk” vibe. Such opulent, fancy furnishings didn’t sit well with her, but there was no helping that now.

“Please wait here,” the maid said. She had taken us to a strikingly tasteful room. One wall was made fully from glass, looking out upon a nice courtyard. Not that there was actually a courtyard out there; more like a holo-display set up to *look* like one.

“Understood,” I replied.

“I will bring you drinks. Will black tea do? If you wish, we also have other options available.”

“Works for me. Girls?”

“Fine by me.”

“Me, too.”

“Understood,” the maid said with a bow. “Please wait one moment.” After she left, I sank my butt into a couch.

Ooh, now that’s soft, but it’s springy enough that you don’t sink too far in. The table looked to be a heavy wood with a black luster. It felt like heavy wood, too: if it was real wood, then that would cost a fortune in this universe since wood-based furniture was expensive all across the board.

We didn’t have to wait long until the maid brought us tea. It was pure red, with steam gently rising from the cup.

“What’s the matter?” Elma asked me.

“Is something wrong?” Mimi was confused.

“…No. Forget it.” It wasn’t like the black tea I knew, but as I was a modest man, I decided not to say anything about it. The taste and scent were like normal black tea, but… Did they add food coloring, or something? It was a mystery. Maybe they just used different tea leaves to begin with.

We waited a bit under an hour, sipping at our too-red black tea. Finally, the time was at hand.

“My lord is coming now,” the maid informed us. “Please stand from your seats and greet him properly.” We obeyed her and stood up to await

Count Dalenwald's arrival.

Before long, the heavy door to the reception room opened, ushering in a single elderly man. Chris followed behind him in an elegant white dress, dolled up like a true princess.

The elderly man was tall, with a strong and sturdy build. He had two swords at his hip, one long and one short, adding to his dignified appearance. His once-black hair now stood out with the whiteness of age, but it was still bushy and healthy-looking.

But the count's most striking features were his eyes. They were black, with all the sharpness and strength of a hawk's, showing no sign of decline whatsoever. To be honest, I expected him to be frail, but nope. This was one heck of a grandpa.

"I am Count Abraham Dalenwald," said Chris' grandfather, Abraham Dalenwald, as he glared at me. For some reason, he was awfully intimidating. Anyway, a noble had introduced himself to me, so I had to respond in kind.

I quickly answered, "I'm Captain Hiro, a gold-ranked mercenary affiliated with the mercenary guild. I'm not too confident about my etiquette, so please forgive me if I do or say anything impolite. These two are my crew members on the *Krishna*. This one here is my co-pilot, Elma, while the other one is my operator, Mimi. The woman standing behind me is our Maidroid, Mei."

Following my introduction, Elma and Mei bowed their heads in respect. Mimi then followed suit. She seemed to be losing her nerve in front of the man. As an impoverished citizen of the empire, she must have been scared witless of this high-class noble.

"My name is Elma."

"A-and I'm M-Mimi."

"I am called Mei."

"Mm," Count Dalenwald responded curtly. "You may sit."

"Yes, sir," we all answered at once.

We all sat and had our tea refilled. It was the same reddish-black tea. Should I just call it *red* tea? Eh…I'll just stick with "black" tea.

“First, I should thank you,” the count began. “Your work in protecting Christina, heir to the Dalenwald name, was fantastic. As both head of the family and her grandfather, I am grateful to you all.”

I responded, “I’d like to say it was nothing, but honestly, we went through hell and back.”

“Hey!” Elma said in a loud whisper.

“I have to tell it like it is. He probably knew about it from Chris, but I wanted Count Dalenwald to hear it from me, too.” I defended my stomach from Elma’s elbow jabs and explained my perspective.

“You are correct. Christina did tell me about some of the details, but I would also like to hear your retelling of the events.” Count Dalenwald was generous enough to not mind my tone.

I smirked at Elma, prompting another painful elbow jab. *How rude!*

Thus, I explained to Count Dalenwald—with some help from Mimi, Elma, and Chris—what we did, how we were attacked, and how we protected Chris, all in as much detail as possible.

We’d arrived at the Cierra System, immediately had to fight off pirates, and found Chris’ cold sleep pod among the loot. We couldn’t leave her there, so we’d taken the pod to Cierra Prime. We freed her from cold sleep at the Port Authority, and that was how we met Chris.

“Hmm. How fortunate it was that she met you.”

“Yes,” Chris agreed. “But it is all thanks to my mother and father for sending me away in the pod.”

“Right…” A mournful mood fell upon both of the Dalenwalds.

I took a sip of “black” tea and continued the story.

We told him about everything after we found Chris—how I accepted the request to protect her for a reward, how we made reservations all over the resort planets to slow down her uncle, and how we were attacked by assassins just as soon as we left for our vacation. I explained how the resort planet was attacked by pirates while we were there, how they used stealth dropships to attack us with battle robots. I told the count that I’d used my own connections to get Serena’s Pirate-Hunting Unit to help us out, and that we were attacked by imperial ships…thanks to a *certain* uncle.

"We finally returned to Cierra Prime, and that's where you come in."

"I see… Hmm. That doesn't contradict what Christina told me. I promise you an adequate reward, including reimbursing your expenses."

"How gracious of you."

If I had said, "*That's just what I wanted to hear!"* no doubt Elma would wring my neck. I couldn't complain about a reward *plus* reimbursement. I mean, really… I get to save a cutie like Chris, *and* make a ton of money? *Hell yeah!!!*

Obviously, I would have helped anyone who needed help, but I couldn't deny that Chris being a cute girl made me way more inclined to help her out.

"We can discuss the payment details later," I said. "So, what now?"

"Hmm…" Count Dalenwald rubbed his chin in thought. "I've brought as much of an army as I can mobilize, but I don't know if we'll make it out unscathed if a formal army, second-rate or otherwise, comes our way. If you're willing, I would prefer to continue utilizing your bodyguard services."

"As long as you're willing to pay me, that sounds like a done deal. How about you girls?"

"I don't care." Elma had no objection to protecting Chris. Mimi was still too tense to talk, but she just nodded her head vigorously in agreement. I didn't ask Mei; it wasn't like she cared to speak her mind at times like this, anyway.

"Then let's talk about your reward," the count said. "First, your work guarding Christina so far."

Count Dalenwald summoned his secretary, who began to negotiate rewards with us. As a result, we were completely compensated for the funds we used to make resort reservations. We were also paid for our bodyguard work itself. That's nobility for you: they just gave me 8,000,000 Ener right on the spot! Guess that shows how much Chris was worth to them.

The stuff we bought at Cierra III—including Mei herself—didn't count as necessary expenses for protecting Chris, so they weren't covered.

That was fine; we had just gotten Mei, so she naturally hadn't contributed that much to protecting Chris.

Added to the 240,000 Ener we got from protecting Serena's *Pelican IV* and subtracting Mimi and Elma's cuts, my current funds were now around 24,400,000 Ener. That's also roughly subtracting Cierra III's docking fees, the stuff I bought for Mei from the receptionist at Oriental Industries, optional parts, and other such miscellaneous expenses.

By the way, the girls' cuts of our rewards turned out to be 41,200 Ener for Mimi and 247,200 Ener for Elma. Before long, our beloved elf would have enough money for a customized ship worthy of a bronze-ranked mercenary—not that she had paid me back a single Ener yet. But hey, I didn't care. It was fun to be around her, and she was a great help.

24,400,000 Ener, though…! Sheesh, with that much money, a mothership that could house the *Krishna* was very much in reach, though I would need more if I wanted to customize it a bit. Now that we'd been paid for our work thus far, it was time to talk about future rewards.

"The market price for hiring a gold-ranked mercenary is 80,000 Ener per day, but in this particular instance, we're willing to offer 250,000 a day," the secretary said.

250,000 Ener a day was pretty darn generous, considering that was more than three times what Serena paid us. I certainly didn't mind the higher pay, but I wondered if there was a reason for it.

While I questioned the sum in my mind, Elma leaned over and whispered, "Apart from the bodyguard work, that also comes with a 'hush hush' fee. They're planning to tell you more about the Dalenwald family's problems."

"I know we already mentioned it, but we kind of already told Serena everything," I replied.

"I think he's taken that into consideration. All the stuff going on with Chris' uncle is a scandal that's beyond Count Dalenwald's control now, but the stuff about the stealth dropships and the deserters could hurt people's trust in the empire. The empire and the count can take care of that, so they don't want us telling others about it. If we started spreading rumors, we could make an enemy of them."

“Eep…” I shuddered. “I’ll zip my lips. Mimi, you should be careful, too.”

“Y-yes, sir…!” Mimi went pale and nodded alongside me. The Dalenwalds just stared at us, the count himself expressionless and his granddaughter grinning anxiously. His secretary was full-on smiling. *Buddy, you’re kinda scary.*

“We accept your terms,” I ultimately replied.

“That’s good. Resupplying and *cleaning* will take a few days, so you should proceed with your launch preparations. We’ll deal with the mercenary guild and provide you with a proper request.”

“Understood.”

He emphasized the word *cleaning* in a weird way, but I figured it was best to ignore it despite how it sounded. *Note to self: Do not make an enemy of the nobility. They’re terrifying…*

Having accepted our reward for the work so far and formed a new bodyguard contract, we left Count Dalenwald’s flagship.

“I look forward to being in your care from tomorrow on,” Chris said, bowing her head. She had come to see us off alongside some burly bodyguards.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Just leave it to us.”

“Yes! I’ll do my best for you, Chris!” Mimi chimed in.

“Not that there’s much point in worrying anymore,” Elma shrugged.

As we were about to leave, I remembered something and stopped in my tracks. As I reached into my inner jacket pocket, the bodyguards raised their laser rifles at me.

Guys! I’m not reaching for a weapon, so you don’t have to ready your lasers! Please! You’re gonna make me piss myself! Jeez…

“Chris, here’s your necklace.”

It was the necklace I had taken from Chris when we first woke her up from the cold sleep pod—an elegant, well-made item fitted with a lilac gemstone.

“You may keep it with you,” she refused. “You haven’t finished protecting me, after all…my knight.”

Count Dalenwald’s little fleet here looked pretty strong to me so I doubted he’d need me to stay on guard duty. But if that was what Chris wanted, then maybe I’d hang on to the necklace for a while.

“If that is your wish, milady.”

“Yes, it is.” Chris smiled at my answer.

Yep, still super cute. You could tell she was a refined lady from a noble family, especially while she wore that white dress.

“See you again soon,” I said.

“Yes. Soon again.”

With our maintenance and resupplying complete, tomorrow would be the perfect day: Earn 250,000 Ener just for sitting on our butts and doing nothing. Now that Chris was safely on her grandfather’s flagship, her uncle wouldn’t have any reason to go after us. Finally, we’d get to rest our weary souls.

Chapter 5:
Fool Me Thrice…

THE DAY AFTER we delivered Chris to Count Dalenwald's ship, we sat at the breakfast table after our morning training/cleaning/grooming regimen.

"I wanna go shopping with Mimi. Do you mind?" Elma asked.

"Nah, no problem." I wasted no time in agreeing.

"Wow. I didn't expect that quick of an answer."

"Why would I say no? Chris is well-protected with her grandfather, and nobody's gonna come after us. You two have been stuck in the ship ever since we left Cierra III, so you need some time off, right?" I had left yesterday for Mei's upgrade, so it was only fair that Mimi and Elma get the chance to go out now. "But take Mei with you, just in case. I won't leave the ship, so I don't need any protection."

"Hm? Oh…sure. Good idea. We'll do that."

"Mei gets to come shopping with us!" Mimi was excited.

"Yes, I shall join you."

At first, Mimi had been wary of Mei due to past trauma related to Maidroids, but now they were good friends. With the upgrade, Mei could even act as a teacher to Mimi now, so I hoped they would continue to get along well.

"Oh, yeah," I remembered. "I'll give you some money too, Mei. Can't shop without some cash, right?"

"Are you certain?"

"*Absolutely* certain."

She was like my dependent, anyway. Though I guess you could say the same for Mimi and Elma, since I was helping them out with food, shelter, and necessities. They just paid for their own clothes since they were buying things to suit their own tastes.

“Isn’t this a bit much?” Mei asked, apparently bothered by the amount.

“Clothes add up fast,” I said with a shrug. When we bought clothes for Mimi before, it cost nearly 30,000 Ener. I had given Mei the same amount. “Also, we can write off daily necessities as expenses. Same as usual.”

“Gotcha. Stay home and out of trouble, okay?”

“I can’t make much mischief when I’m alone, anyway. Quit worrying!” Not that we ever *needed* anyone to stay with the ship, so I could’ve gone with them. But a man going shopping with women poses some issues for the man. Specifically, the fact that the women take *forever* to shop.

“Off we go!” Mimi squealed.

“Indeed,” Mei added.

“Good luck, girls. I figure you’ll be fine but be careful.”

Once the girls left, I had some rare alone time. I wondered what to do with myself. Cleaning, maybe? No: Mei did that perfectly already.

I hadn’t found any real hobbies since I came to this universe. I was a gamer in my old world, but gaming consoles, as a concept, didn’t exist here. Gaming was possible on my terminal, but they were all lighter games for casual players, which didn’t fit my taste much. I preferred more hardcore games: games where you could set up a huge screen and really go *wild*. Stuff with loud noises, explosions, blood and guts, and the like.

“Wow. Suddenly, I don’t have a life without the girls around…” I shuddered at the realization that I couldn’t even waste time by myself anymore and decided to head to the cafeteria instead of just standing around doing nothing. I had to sit down and calm myself. I mean, hell, why not just read the news on my terminal if I was that bored?

If nothing else, I could look around for gaming peripherals. In a universe this advanced, there had to be *something* if I looked. Like, say, a headset terminal for VR games.

But just as I reached for my terminal, the cafeteria’s buzzer went off.

“Is someone here?”

If the girls had come back for something they forgot, then they wouldn't use the buzzer. It had to be a visitor, then. Was Chris here to hang out? Ignoring the buzzer would be stupid in any case, so I set up a holo-display using my terminal and saw a very familiar face.

"Nobody's home," I said.

"Don't be a jerk!" The blonde beauty onscreen grinned intimidatingly.

She wasn't wearing her usual uniform today, but it was clearly the blonde beauty, Lieutenant Commander Serena, onscreen. She had a smile on her face, but her eyes were clearly unhappy. And scary.

"Uh…Mimi and the others aren't around, so I shouldn't let you in."

"Why can't I come in when they're not here?"

"I feel like I'm in danger. I need an adult. *Multiple* adults."

"That doesn't sound like something a man should say to a *female* guest."

Is it just me, or are there veins bulging from her temple? I don't think it's just me. Not that I actually saw them, but I wouldn't be surprised in the slightest. Heck, I'd wager money on it.

"Putting that aside," I added, "a woman shouldn't go onto a man's ship alone, right? How about I come out to meet you, instead?"

"Hmm…that's fair. Very well. Come out immediately."

"Can I ask *why* first?"

Serena wasn't wearing her military uniform, but it was rather active wear. The style was similar to the mercenary outfits that Elma and I wore. She still had that crazy sword at her hip, though it didn't stand out as much due to her long coat.

"Half of our ship is on leave, so I came to spend time with you," Serena explained.

"Why would you come to me for that? Just hang out with your subordinates, or… Aww, are you lonely?"

"What worker would want to spend their free time with superiors? I'm being considerate towards them, and I'm *not* lonely. I have a good

relationship with my subordinates. So, again, I am *not* lonely!" Serena protested, shivering like a sad puppy.

Okay, okay, my bad. Please don't cry, or it'll make me feel like I'm in the wrong. "Okay, I'm sorry," I surrendered. "Just stop crying, please. I'll come right now, okay?"

"I'm not crying!!!"

That's not very convincing when you're quaking like that, Lieutenant Commander, I thought. I'd feel bad if I sent her away now, so I decided to play along. *Why is it that she's a perfect superhuman when she's in uniform, but when she's not, she's kind of a hot mess? Is this what no rest and all work does to a woman?*

Anyway, I used the terminal's messaging app to let the girls know I was leaving, too. I figured I'd just activate the ship's shields remotely. Since they had already recovered our waste and replenished our air and water supplies, there wouldn't be any issue with leaving the shields up.

I sent a message to the group chat before heading out: *I'm leaving the* Krishna *for a while. Will activate the shields remotely.* After sending that in the group chat, I headed for the door. I was in my usual merc clothing, but who would care? It wasn't like Serena was super dressed up herself.

"Apologies for the wait, Lieutenant Commander," I greeted her.

"Please don't call me that on my day off."

"Then what should I call you?"

"Just *Serena* is fine."

"Ha ha ha! Okay, Lady Serena." I quickly brushed off her suggestion, and we both laughed. Did we look like a happy couple right now? No way; nobody could be stupid enough to miss the palpable tension between us.

"Fine," she sighed. "That will do. Shall we?"

"Sure. Uh…where should we go?"

"Oh? I thought it was the man's job to be the escort in these situations." Serena said, cocking her head as if astounded. I sighed, crossed my arms, and looked up to the sky—well, the colony's ceiling.

How am I supposed to answer a request like that?

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"It's a little early for lunch," I mused. "Do you wanna just…wander around somewhere?"

"Wander…?"

"Y'know. Walking around without a set destination in mind. Or, to put it in more fun terms, 'looking for something cool to do.'"

"Something cool… Yes, that does sound fun though I don't like haphazard things."

"Well, don't blame me for being haphazard!"

How ridiculous can you get? You barge in, tell me to take you somewhere, tell me to escort you, and yet you still complain! I haven't walked around Cierra Prime myself, and I haven't done much research on the shopping and hotspots here.

"But is it not inefficient to walk around without some objective?"

"Very true," I agreed. "But I have just the thing!" I showed Serena my handheld terminal.

"A VR station?"

"Yeah. A lot of people end up coming to the Cierra System, but then they fail to get reservations to the resort planets or they go over budget because everything's so expensive. So they set up these VR facilities. At this point, their realistic VR experiences have become a major draw for people who come just to see fake sights."

"I see… But doesn't it seem unhealthy to hole up in an imaginary space now that we've bothered to go outside?"

"Unhealthy?" I raised an eyebrow, not sure what she was getting at. I was pretty damn excited, myself. *It's VR! My first time using* real *virtual reality! Woooo!*

"Full-dive virtual reality requires you to lie down in a coffin-shaped machine, and you're naturally defenseless throughout. I've heard tell of some unethical VR stations."

“Unethical how?” I asked.

“They’ll lock people into VR spaces and then carry off their real bodies, selling them to pirates as slaves. They truly do the worst things. And even if you’re not sold to pirates, they might sell you to some undesirable as an illegal slave. Even if they don’t go that far, they’ll still purloin your valuables.”

“Wow, that’s legit awful.”

Serena continued, “I’ve also heard of them installing hacking devices into the VR machines to steal money from customers’ Ener wallets.”

Now that was scary. Still, she was trying awfully hard to scare me. *Wait, I know what’s going on here.* “You have a personal problem with VR stations, do you?”

“Now I didn’t say that.” Serena flashed a perfect smile. True, she *didn’t* say that, but it was clear that she wanted me to read between the lines.

“Okay, okay,” I said, dropping the subject. “Now it’s your turn. I came up with one idea, and you didn’t like it, so now *you* have to come up with something. That’s only fair, right?”

“Hmph, so that’s your game. Hmm… Might I suggest this?” Serena showed me her own terminal. Onscreen was a human-sized, insect-like alien with four arms. He was a chef, presenting his varied dishes and many different colored drinks.

“As a resort system, the Cierra System is frequented by the wealthy,” Serena explained. “And if the wealthy know anything, it’s good food and drink. High-quality food and drink from the empire and other nations are brought here before being sent to other systems. Naturally, as the system’s commerce hub, Cierra Prime has many restaurants that handle just those things.”

“No way,” I replied.

“Why not?!” Serena furiously demanded a reason for my quick refusal. *Oh? You* really *wanna know?*

“If we went there, you’d get drunk off your ass again. I’m not gonna look after a hammered Serena all on my own!”

"Wha—?! I would never!"

"Big words, for someone who's already done it *twice*."

"You…!" Serena shrunk back from my verbal barrage.

Hey, it's super effective! But to be totally honest, drinking with Serena without the girls around seemed like it would lead to her crying and hugging all over me. I wasn't confident that I'd be able to hold myself back if she showed her vulnerable side.

Serena was like the world's most obvious landmine, yes, but also… she was *insanely* hot. Despite knowing that I'd be in big trouble if I touched her, it was still possible that I might do it anyway. *I just don't trust my willpower much, so I won't take any risks.*

While I argued with Serena, two men barged in between us.

"We got a fight here?"

"Damn, she really is a hottie!"

What's with these guys? They look like weirdo pickup artists.

"What do you two want?" Serena demanded, her voice as cold as absolute zero.

"I don't know who you guys are, but I'd stay far away from her if I were you," I warned.

"What'd you just say?!" One man whipped around and tried to punch me, but I seized his neck and caught his fist much faster. *Little too short-tempered there, my dude. Are you drunk, or are you just trying to look cool?*

"Look, I don't want any trouble, ya feel me?" I said, gradually strengthening my grip. I looked over to see what the other guy was doing. It seemed he'd frozen in place when Serena reached for her sword. He must have lost his nerve as soon as he saw that she was nobility.

I could tell that the man I was strangling was gearing up to kick me, so I smacked him in the Adam's apple, shoving him away in the process.

"*Guh?!* Gack, *hack!* Y-you little…!"

"H-hey, man, let's back off," the other man warned.

“What?! After this guy made a fool of me?!” The man I shoved away was furious, but when he saw Serena begin to unsheathe her sword, he went pale.

“What. Do. You. *Want?*” Serena repeated.

“N-nothing, m-ma’am!!!”

“We’re sorry for bothering you!!!”

The two ran away as fast as they could. *Wow, I guess commoners really* are *terrified of nobles.*

“Hmph. Those fools ruined the fun,” Serena complained. “How rude can men be?”

“Hey, now. Let’s not get too mad. You’re much prettier when you smile, Lady Serena.”

“Is that how you talk girls into your bedroom…?” she wondered aloud.

I grimaced. “Please don’t talk about me like I’m a womanizer.”

“But you are, in fact, living with multiple women, so…”

“Rgh!”

This time, Serena’s assault was a critical hit on me. I mean, she was *right*, but…it’s just how things turned out, okay? I couldn’t abandon Mimi or Elma back then. And who wouldn’t help a poor, lovely girl from her *awful* fate if he had the chance? Every man wants to look good, after all.

Not that I’m a saint or anything. If it had been an old man in trouble, he would have just had to fend for himself.

“Okay, that’s enough of this talk. No more,” I declared.

“I don’t care either way. So, what shall we do? We might find ourselves harassed again, given your tendency to attract trouble.”

“My tendency? *Mine*?! How do you know it’s not *yours*?”

“Ruffians like them never bother me when I go out alone.”

“Wait, really?” I assumed that a beauty like her would get hit on constantly.

“Not that it matters, of course. Why don’t we go somewhere and settle down? People are staring, after all.”

“Sounds like you’re taking me out to eat and drink somewhere…” I complained.

“Hee hee…”

“Ha ha ha…”

***

“So, it’s come to this, after all,” I said with a sigh.

“Most men can only dream of sharing a meal with me. Why are you so disappointed?”

“I won’t be if you can just drink in *moderation*.” I looked at her pointedly.

After a moment, Serena finally said, “I’ll do what I can.”

Maybe I should send a distress signal to the girls now. I’ll tell them where I am, say “Serena is currently drinking,” and bam!

Serena must have finished ordering while I was calling for backup, as a small door opened in the wall next to us and ushered in our food and drinks. *So it’s like the order lane from a rotating sushi place, huh?*

“I propose a toast,” Serena declared.

“Fine, but to what?” Nobody was watching, so I was free to be as rude as ever.

“Anything is fine. I just propose one, is all.”

We raised our glasses, Serena’s filled with something wine-like and mine filled with a soft drink and tapped them together with a light *clink*. Befitting of a high-class restaurant, even the glass my soft drink was in was thin and expensive-looking.

“Mm, delicious,” Serena sighed. “That’s why they call this the place where all the amusements of the empire are gathered. What *lovely* wine!”

“Glad you’re enjoying yourself.”

Can you please just be on your best behavior for once? The words tried to leave my mouth, but I knew that just repeating myself could have the opposite effect. Like if you tell someone over and over not to press a big red button.

“So, did you call your girlfriends?” Serena put her glass down and stared at me. *She’s a clever one. Here I thought I had her, since I did it while she was ordering.*

“I had to do it—for both of us.”

“Hmph… I’ve been wondering why you’re so cold to me. It’s as if you’re building a wall between us. You can open up a little more, you know.” Serena glared even harder, perplexing me.

“Huh?” *Of course I’m building a wall. I’m doing everything I can to keep this wall as strong as the* Krishna*’s shields.* “No, thanks. I’m staying out of trouble.”

“Can you stop calling me that with such a straight face? You’ll make me cry…”

“Crying is a coward’s way out. Besides, *trouble* is the only word that describes you.”

“What part of me is *trouble*?!”

“Just being a lieutenant commander *and* nobility are enough to make you as much trouble as a saturation attack of heat-seeking missiles.”

“Don’t be so logical about it!” In despair, Serena downed her whole glass of wine. *Stop that! Cease your insane drinking, lest ye repeat thine past mistakes!*

“Hell, you *are* a noble. Aren’t you going to end up in an arranged marriage?”

“I’d prefer not to talk about that.”

“Fair enough.”

Serena looked awfully peeved, so I decided to let it go. If she was betrothed to someone, it was probably someone she didn’t like or had a bad experience with.

“Aren’t you interested?” she asked.

“Not really,” I answered, shaking my head.

“Just say you are!” Serena slammed her fists onto the table.

“Hey, mind your table manners,” I scolded. “I’ll call over an employee if you keep doing annoying things like that.”

“You insulted me again!” she screamed. “I’m just annoying and troublesome, right?! I ought to just grow up to be an old, wrinkly lady, sad and all alone!”

“Uh, I doubt that’ll happen. I figure you’ll have a marriage arranged sooner or later, right?”

I didn’t know much about nobility, but noblewomen are always in great demand. Plenty of families would want to marry into the marquess’, so why should Serena want for husbands? Of course, I doubt she would marry into any family that the marquess didn’t want her to.

“I don’t want to marry someone I’ve never even met.”

“I mean, you could just meet them, go out, and see if you can find stuff you like about them.”

“But then I meet the man, and he’s either a weakling who’s never held a gun in his life, let alone a sword. Or he’s a burly giant who still can’t even beat me in sword combat! *OR* he’s some lunatic who knows swordplay, but uses it to cut down as many commoners as he *desires*!!!”

“So basically, you want a man who’s not too burly, not too weak, can hold his own against you in a swordfight, *and* blessed with natural virtue? I dunno, seems likes your standards might be too high.” I could sympathize with her only meeting men she didn’t like, but what if her expectations were just too unattainable? That would just make her lonelier.

“What’s wrong with wanting a quality life partner?” Serena started tapping around on the table’s tablet, as if trying to escape my cold rebuttal. Yep, she was going to get blackout drunk today.

“If you want to go down that route, we don’t exactly match, either. I can’t swing a sword at all.” I had never held a sword in my life. Sure, as a kid, I’d fight other kids with sticks, but I never leaned actual swordplay. I *did* buy a replica sword during a field trip in high school, which was very

cringe…but, I mean, it was just too cool to resist. A replica sword! I never swung it, though, because it was *way* too dangerous.

"I would be more surprised if someone of common blood *did* know swordplay," she answered. "But when you put on your power armor, you have the courage to fight mutated monsters and cut them down. And not only do you fight pirates in your lone battleship, but you also charged in and sunk the Belbellum's flagship on your own. Such recklessness is a rare talent for a battleship pilot. And though you call yourself an outsider, you whipped a bunch of fools into pirate-hunting shape, and even have the eye for strategy to come up with tactics just for them. Besides—"

"Okay, that's enough!" I pleaded. "I feel all gross getting showered with compliments."

I had to stop Serena from trying to butter me up. *I get it; she admires strong men, but she hates the overt macho man stereotype. Maybe I fit her tastes, after all.*

"Still, I don't think you and I would work out," I decided. "Even if we were madly in love with each other."

"I knooooow…" Serena sighed and handed me the table's tablet. I accepted it and looked at the order history. *That's a whole lot of stuff that looks like alcohol. Geez, this woman never learns.* "At least, not right now. If you were to become a platinum rank and gain a gold star, things might be different."

"I know only some of those phrases. What's a gold star?" I cocked my head at the unfamiliar term.

"It is the First-Magnitude Star's Cross of Brilliance. 'Gold star' is more of a colloquial term. The distinction is given to those who achieve outstanding accomplishments in the imperial fleet's battles. I'll have you know that it's the highest distinction possible for a single soldier. The recipient receives a considerable salary and is treated like nobility, though in a limited capacity."

"I see… It almost sounds like it's based more on luck than skill, huh?"

"Given the right battlefield, I'm sure you could get one." Serena stared me down, but I pretended not to notice. I didn't want to react badly and make her throw me into one of said battlefields. "Why are you ignoring me?! *Pay attention to me*!!!"

"Girls! Hurry up and save me already!"

In this high-class establishment, the walls were completely soundproofed. No matter how loud we got, the employees didn't yell at—not us even once. However, I did end up having to deal with a *certain* irritating lieutenant commander until the girls finished their shopping and came to my rescue.

Chapter 6:
Our First Ride in a Gateway

THREE DAYS after we'd delivered Chris to Count Dalenwald, we were finally set to leave Cierra Prime.

What about Serena, you ask? Well, thanks to Mei's quick actions, we were able to keep her from getting blackout drunk. Mei helped a ton by making Serena drink enough water to take the edge off all the booze.

There had been an awful lot of shocking occurrences over the past three days. Unidentified corpses had been found hung from the streetlights, as if put on display. Not far from there in an unsafe district, there had been shootings. I couldn't help but remember the way Count Dalenwald's secretary had emphasized the word *cleaning*, but I did my best to avoid thinking about it. *I don't know what's going on, but it sure is creepy!*

The first day involved Serena dragging me around, but after that, we set up Mei's new maintenance pod in the cargo room. I got to enjoy some alone time with Mimi, Elma, and Mei, which was sorely needed after holding back for so long with Chris around.

Possibly due to Mei's influence, Mimi and Elma were awfully aggressive. Not that they were trying to outdo her or anything. I think they liked our new Maidroid; in fact, they were getting along great. They talked with her frequently, and they even bathed with her sometimes.

It almost seemed like they were all conspiring. A mystery, to be sure. Not that I minded, as long as we all got along.

"Master Hiro?" Mimi addressed me, worried.

"Hm? Oh, sorry. I was just thinking to myself."

"Everything okay?" Elma asked. "We're about to launch."

"Nah, just remembering last night—ow, ow, ouch!"

One slightly blushing elf tugged at my ear. *Ha ha ha! It's adorable how you always act so innocent, Elma.*

We didn't need to go through much trouble for this launch, since we were counted as being part of Count Dalenwald's fleet for now. They were taking care of it from their side, so we just had to follow the Port Authority's orders and lift off.

"So now we make easy money, as long as we don't get ambushed," I said, sighing contentedly.

"Right," Mimi confirmed. "250,000 Ener in a day is incredible… Can nobles really just throw around money like that?"

"They do have to keep up appearances," Elma explained. "If people knew high-class nobles were hiring a gold-rank merc for market price, everyone would think they're going bankrupt. The same goes for merchants, too. The military might hire us for eighty thousand a day, but merchants usually hire for up to double that. And nobles pay at *least* double that."

"Wow…" Mimi gasped. "That's what it's like being rich, huh? For a commoner like me, it's too much money to even imagine."

"So you say, Mimi, but you make a ton of money for a commoner," Elma replied with a smirk.

"Ha ha ha… Sometimes, I'm too scared to check my Ener balance."

I don't remember exactly how much money Mimi had earned, but given our rewards from the other day, she was probably at over 100,000 Ener. That converts to about 10,000,000 Japanese yen. Mimi was old enough to be considered an adult, but not many people her age had money like that.

Elma was probably around 1,200,000 Ener. Or she would be if she wasn't going around buying 100,000-Ener drinks. She owed me 3,000,000 too, so she was probably a quarter of the way there.

"Oh!" Mimi exclaimed. "Our unit has been given permission to launch. We'll be the last to go."

"Understood. Let me know when it's time."

"Yes, sir. Ships are leaving one at a time… Large craft are really slow movers."

“Only in the port,” Elma added. “Since they’re so heavy, you don’t want them accelerating too much and hitting something.”

“Yeeeah. It’d be downright catastrophic.” I had never done it myself, but newbies to *Stella Online* who had just traded up for large ships would pilot them like small ones. When they first tried to leave port, they’d crash their shiny new vehicle right into the port or other ships, immediately ruining them.

Before long, it was our turn. We released our docking from the hangar and propelled forward. The colony was just as busy as ever today. Despite the attack on Cierra III a few days ago, faith in its defense system actually *increased* because of how it held out until the imperial fleet arrived. It kinda stunk of information manipulation, but I didn’t care enough to probe too deeply into it.

“Ah, I love spaceships,” I sighed. “The sensation of slipping through space, having total control over the ship, the slight tension… It’s all wonderful. There’s also this sense of freedom, like you’ve just jumped into the ocean.”

“Like you’ve jumped into the ocean…?” Mimi sounded curious.

“I get how you feel, kinda,” Elma said. “Though I feel freer in the forest than the sea.” It seemed Elma felt free in space, too. Maybe every kind of pilot knew the feeling well.

“Will I feel that way someday, too?” Mimi asked.

“Maybe. To be fair, Elma and I probably feel it in different ways.” The sensation was perhaps something deeply personal and sensuous. A reminder of freedom or joy, right from the bottom of your heart. Other people would probably find it hard to understand.

“Unfortunately, this conversation is beyond me,” Mei said from her sub-operator seat.

Since Chris was off the ship now, Mei was sitting in her rightful place. We usually had her helping Mimi out, improving her skills wherever possible. After all, if we let her use her full potential, she would just steal Mimi’s job altogether.

We slid through the port and out of the airtight gate. Finally, we were out of the colony.

“They’re to the lower left,” Mimi informed me. “Right now, they seem to be arranging their formation.”

“We’re the rear guard, right?”

“Yes, sir!”

It was easier for the rear guard to react to the start of a battle in most cases. As long as enemies didn’t attack head-on, the vanguard would have to turn around to face them. It would only take a moment for me, but that moment could spell the difference between life and death. On the other hand, it was also easiest for the rear guard to get attacked first.

We slipped right into the very back of the formation. “Set FTL drive and hyperdrive to sync mode,” I commanded.

“I’ve set the faster-than-light and hyperdrive to sync mode,” Mimi confirmed. “Synchronization request accepted!”

“Awesome! Now…we just wait.”

Since we were synced to the flagship vessel today, there was no need for us to directly operate FTL travel or hyperdrive. They would automatically activate whenever the flagship did so.

Before long, there was a *boom* as the *Krishna* shifted to FTL travel and then activated hyperdrive, sending us into hyperspace.

“No matter how many times I see it, it’s just so strange and beautiful,” Mimi mused with a sigh, watching the endless colors of hyperspace.

“You’ve got that right,” I agreed. “But I bet it’ll make you sick if you stare too long.”

“Will it? I could watch it forever.”

“You’re tough in all the strangest ways…” Elma shook her head.

“Hey, that was rude!” Mimi sounded offended, but I had to agree with Elma. Not that I had the guts to say it.

Basically, hyperlanes look kind of like giant tubes with every color in the rainbow everywhere at once. But they’re also a giant, open space at the

same time. Basically, it's psychedelic as heck: it might look pretty at first glance, but if I stared at it too long, my depth perception and sense of balance would go haywire and make me sick.

And even if she didn't want to admit it, Mimi was a weird kind of tough to call hyperspace "beautiful" and say that she could look at it forever.

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The journey was smooth enough. You can't interfere with hyperdrive travel, so we faced no particular issues. Nobody interdicted us, even when we returned to normal space and traveled via FTL.

We used hyperlanes repeatedly to travel between star systems, eventually arriving at the Bardemure System, four systems away from the Cierra System. If we'd wanted to go straight to the Dexar System, then this was completely the wrong way, but we had a reason for the detour.

"Wooow… Is that the gateway?" Mimi asked, her eyes glowing with excitement.

"Dang! They're huge when you see 'em up close!" I said, naturally flaunting my elementary-schooler vocabulary. But I mean, how else could I describe it?

The gateway was a complex structure, but in simplistic terms, it was like a pair of metallic triangular pyramid devices that were *waaaaaay* bigger than any space colony. Between the pyramids was a pocket of warped space that emitted strange sparks. Many ships came and went through the distortion. Truly, the gateway was the culmination of the greatest imperial technology.

It was different in shape from the gateways I knew, but not everything in this universe was exactly like *Stella Online*. Besides, I figured it was a minor difference. The empire that developed and managed it was different, anyway.

"Oh, yeah," Elma remembered. "You two haven't seen gateways before."

“Yeah. I’ve only known about them.”

“Same here,” Mimi said.

Only knowing about something is different from seeing it up close. *Holy cow, it’s freaking* huge*,* I thought. *Are the sensors displaying it on the wrong scale? Is this real? Just one of the pyramids is even bigger than the entire Cierra Prime colony!* Add in the size of the space between them, and the entire thing could easily be bigger than a planet.

“But now that we’re here, we must be safe, right?” Mimi asked. “The gateway is guarded by imperial defenders, so we won’t be attacked.”

“Right,” I answered. “It’d be outright stupid to attack us here. They would get blown away in two seconds flat.”

Gateways were able to transport things astronomical distances in an instant—anywhere from thousands to tens of thousands of light years away. They were strategic locations second in importance only to the imperial capital itself.

Naturally, the security forces at the gateway were much stronger than the imperial forces stationed in the system we’d previously stayed at. If I were to challenge them, they’d turn the *Krishna* into space dust. Put bluntly, you’d need enough power to stand up against the entire empire’s fleet if you wanted to attack a gateway. That was because gateways had *wicked* strong security. Unless you attacked multiple gateways at once, they could send reinforcements from the other gateways’ security forces. It’d be like poking a hornets’ nest.

“Yep,” Elma agreed. “Gone in an instant. But I’d say the fact that nothing has happened so far means that we’re about to be in real danger.”

“Think so? Yeah, I guess you’re right. How many gateways away is the Dexar System, again?”

“Five,” Mimi said, bringing up the Galaxy Map on the holo-display. “This gateway leads to the Neepak System, and then the Melkit, Jeagle, Wellick, Kormat, and finally, the Dexar System.” I zoomed in on the display to show the hyperlanes connecting each star system, estimating the average time between them.

“The gateway’s security force won’t act unless something crazy happens, but I bet they’d be willing to attack us from a neighboring system,” I said.

“Right,” Elma nodded.

“So, the Jeagle or Wellick Systems would be the most likely suspects. But the count must have some kind of plan, right?”

“The empire probably granted the count’s family all the systems neighboring the Dexar, so once we get to the Kormat, we should be safe. The Melkit is under direct control of the empire, so even if the count doesn’t do anything directly, our safety should be guaranteed. So you’re right; but if they have a good relationship with the nobility who own the Jeagle and Wellick Systems, then their fleet might escort us.”

Elma tapped around the Galaxy Map as she spoke, dividing the systems based on who controlled what. Like she said, the Melkit belonged to the empire, while the Jeagle and Wellick Systems were controlled by their respective noble families. It was also clear that the Kormat belonged to Count Dalenwald.

“I dunno if it’s just me,” I said, “but I don’t recall neighboring nobles liking each other that much.”

“I agree,” Mimi added.

“It’s not like that’s *always* true,” Elma replied with a shrug. “But I hear things often get dicey when they have competing exports.” The Galaxy Map didn’t include info on noble relations, so we wouldn’t be able to probe that deeply. Since noble relations didn’t factor into our job much, we hadn’t thought to look into it in the first place.

“Basically, it’s too early to relax,” Elma concluded. “Stay vigilant and keep on your toes.”

“Sure thing.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

We looked upon the approaching giant distortion. *Ow! Jeez, Elma, you don’t have to sink your nails into my thigh just because I didn’t give a proper answer!*

“By the way, Mei, what do you think of all this so far?” I asked our maid, who had listened quietly this whole time. She never gave her opinion on stuff like this unless you asked her directly. I guess that’s her prioritizing her role as my helper. *You’re honestly free to jump into the conversation, though…*

“I believe we will be in the most danger when we warp out into the Kormat System.” She refuted our entire discussion in one sentence.

“And why’s that?”

“The Dalenwald Territory is naturally Count Abraham Dalenwald’s home, but it is also home to Balthazar Dalenwald. Based on his actions so far, Balthazar seems adept at bending others to serve his needs. If the Kormat System’s defenders have been swayed to his cause, then that would be the most dangerous.”

She was right about that. Chris’ uncle had mobilized a huge amount of space pirates to attack Cierra III, procuring stealth dropships—secret military weapons—along the way. He even sicced a formal army on us.

What if he did the same thing with the Kormat System’s defenses? That would be pretty darn scary. Count Dalenwald’s current forces could probably stand up to them in quality and quantity, but I didn’t know if they’d ambush us when we warped in. They had a clear advantage in that regard.

“Should we tell the count?” I suggested.

“If it occurred to us, then it’s likely occurred to him. We would just be making fun of his diplomacy skills if we mentioned it.” Elma chuckled.

That was fair. If we went up to him and implied that he didn’t have his own army under control, he’d be pissed. But in my opinion, his diplomacy was questionable from the moment he let his kids run amok.

“Nothing we can do about it, then?”

“Nothing at all,” Elma shrugged. “We just have to do our best and survive.”

“Nothing at all…” Mimi sighed. I had to sigh, too. *Suddenly, I don’t like where this is going…*

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Mercenaries are free birds…that is, until they're hired. Then, we're just humble employees. We don't report to our employers often, and Chris' grandfather was imperial nobility. A *count*, at that. I was terrified just imagining how he would react if I suggested that his subordinates might betray him. Hell, he might just grab his sword and cut me down on the spot.

Thus, Captain Hiro was doomed to keep his lips sealed, I messaged, tapping on my screen to discard a useless mahjong piece.

My grandfather seemed quite wary of any attacks by my uncle. I don't think we need to worry, but… Along with that message, Chris sent a sticker displaying a chibified, thoughtful-looking black cat. Heh. Chris was a skilled player, indeed.

We'll be just fine! As long as we have Master Hiro, anything is possible! Mimi sent a sticker with a squirrel pumping its fists vigorously along with that message. She then discarded a very bold tile, but surprisingly, nobody took it.

Hiro's skilled, but he does have his limits. But yeah, he does usually find a way. Elma's message came with her weird alien cyclops avatar sighing and drinking wine. And her next move was…

Oh, that's ron, I sent. She had given me the winning discard.

Same here! Mimi added.

Why?! Next came the same alien, shooting a beam from its eyes and burning down a city. Elma wasn't a bad player, but she would always get stuck waiting for tiles that never, ever came. Overall, she just had awful luck—or she gambled too much. Either way, it was bad news for her. Ever since we started playing this card-based mahjong app, she always got third or fourth place. On the overall scoreboard, she was dead last.

Our clear winner was Mimi, by the way. She seemed like a slapdash player, but she never got caught in our waits, and each of her moves was meaningful. Alternatively, she just had incredible luck.

I was currently in the cockpit, exchanging messages with the girls as we played. Mimi and Elma were resting, probably in their rooms or in the

cafeteria. Even while we traveled through hyperlanes, we always kept someone in the cockpit just in case. Mimi and Elma were probably in the cafeteria or their rooms while they rested. Since Mei didn't really suffer from fatigue, she stayed with me in the sub-operator chair. She didn't join in the conversation, but she watched our card mahjong game as a passive observer.

I wouldn't lose if this were a racing game! The cyclops alien complained, slouched forward in defeat. Was Elma really that mad about it? To be fair, talking and gaming together were the only things we could do. Hyperlane travel was basically automatic, and we wouldn't be attacked at any point.

At the moment, we were en route from the Jeagle System to the Wellick. After this, we would be in Count Dalenwald's land, if you can really call a star system "land." Anyway, after the Kormat System, we'd be at our destination: the Dexar System.

Things were on high alert when we warped out into the Jeagle System, but Count Dalenwald seemed to have a good relationship with the lord of that system, so their army was glad to join us on our journey. We were now one hour into the ten-hour trip from the Jeagle to the Wellick System.

"Master? If you wish to have a guard during hyperlane travel, I can do it for you," Mei commented as we continued our games of mahjong.

"I know you can handle it, but I'd really hate to use you like that…"

"I do not mind it at all. Unlike organics, we androids feel no fatigue."

"Maybe, but it's the principle of it. I dunno…once I get used to your presence, maybe I'll rely on you more often. There's just nothing else to do during hyperlane travel. We talk, we game, and that's it."

"Perhaps you could strengthen your relationships?"

"I can't live like a hedonist forever… Moderation is best when it comes to that. If I keep indulging myself, I'll end up corrupted."

Mimi and Elma were perfectly beautiful girls. I certainly had no problem with them. Mei was pretty, too. If I indulged myself in them too

much, I'd never be able to part from them. *Maybe it's too late for me already…*

"Is that true?" Mei asked.

"True as can be! I've saved up enough money to just eat good food with the girls every day, kill space pirates once in a blue moon, and live a totally hedonistic lifestyle. But if I let that happen, I'll never break out of it. *Seriously.*"

It felt like I was already getting close to that point, but I still had my dream of earning enough money to buy a detached house with a yard on a residential planet. As far as my short-term goals, I planned on buying and furnishing a mothership with the rewards from this mission. Gotta spend money to make money.

"I see no issue with such a life, but as you wish. Please let me know if you do not want such a life, and I will do anything I can to aid you." Mei sounded totally sincere as she said it. In a way, she was the most terrifying crew member here, actively tempting me toward the path to depravity.

Maybe I set her service setting too high. Or is she just listening because her faithfulness is set to strictly? Whatever; as long as I stay serious, I should be fine. I hope.

Our unit made it to the Wellick System, which we passed through without approaching any colonies. Seeing as how the star system's fleet was willing to guide us through the system just like in the Jeagle System, Count Dalenwald must have been handling diplomacy well.

"We'll warp out at noon," Elma informed me. "Want me to take over so you can nap?"

"I will remain in the cockpit during hyperlane travel," Mei declared. "Perhaps you all could rest now? If our warp out into the Kormat System will be a dangerous one, then you will need to be in perfect condition."

"No, I don't wanna push it all on you—"

As I tried to refuse, Mimi cut in. "Shouldn't we rely on Mei? If she says it'll be dangerous soon, then I believe her. If she's willing to help us, then I believe we should take her up on it."

“Agreed. Hiro, I think you’re too modest at the weirdest times. I don’t wanna push all the hard work onto her either, but it’s also kinda rude to be overly considerate and put her specialties to waste.”

After a moment, I finally asked, “Is that true?”

“True as can be.” Mei repeated what I had said the day before with a nod. “I appreciate your acceptance of me as a sentient individual, but I am a Maidroid. My very reason for living is to serve my master, so it is most appropriate for you to treat me as such. In fact, I would find that preferential.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Mei nodded again.

Well, this is rough. I see Mei as a normal, beautiful woman, just like Mimi and Elma, in addition to being a maid. Remove the robotic bits near her ears, and she doesn’t look mechanical at all. I mean, I only know she’s a machine because of how we got her. Even when I first saw Maidroids on Cierra III, I just thought, “Woohoo, pretty maid babes!”

As long as Mei didn’t get attacked and reveal her mechanical parts, it would be difficult for me to see her wholly as a machine. Especially given that I knew how warm and soft she was.

“Well, I guess we can leave the cockpit to you…” I sighed. “How to rest, though?” I had just woken up three hours ago from a pre-warp nap.

“It’s not exactly our last supper, but how about we have a fancy meal, bathe, and hang out in your room?” Elma suggested.

“Oh ho ho, is that what you want?” I liked where this was going. She wanted to sate her hunger, and then sate her *other* hunger by “hanging out” in my room.

“U-um, I mean… That’s what most people would do, right?” Elma blushed and babbled incoherently at my suggestive tone.

“I think that’s a good idea, too. The three of us can hang out together.” I don’t know if Mimi realized what we were talking about, but she gladly agreed to the proposal. *Oho, a three-way? I know I said all that nonsense about not being depraved yesterday, but I think I’m about to do a complete 180! I’ll just go back to non-depravity tomorrow.*

“That sounds *nice*,” I said with a wink. “All three of us can ‘hang out’ at the same time.”

“H-hey!” Elma shrieked. “Are you being serious right now?!”

“Hanging out, yay! Let’s eat first! I want artificial meat today!”

“Sounds good to me!”

“Hold on!!!” Elma protested.

Mimi and I ignored the screaming elf and went to get some delicious food from the Steel Chef 5. Mei merely looked upon us, her normally expressionless face betraying some slight joy.

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The three of us enjoyed ourselves and returned to the cockpit, ready for warp-out.

“Guess they’re planning to hit us when we warp in, huh?” I mused.

“That’s the natural decision,” Elma agreed.

“I hope nothing happens, but…” Mimi put a hand to her chin in thought. “Is there any point in Balthazar attacking Count Dalenwald now? Count Dalenwald knows about his son’s actions, so isn’t Balthazar done for, no matter what?”

Mei explained, “He’s likely planning to eliminate both Count Dalenwald and Lady Christina to steal the title of count for himself, and then to clean up the mess after he has taken the throne. Otherwise, he faces certain ruin. Based on his actions so far, I calculate an eighty percent chance of an ambush.”

“Not one hundred percent?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Your actions thus far have thwarted Balthazar’s attempts, greatly decreasing his influence. As a result, it is possible that he won’t have the necessary forces. There is not enough information to calculate to that extent.”

“Fair enough. We don’t know what kind of connections he has, after all.”

“Correct.”

Just then, an alarm rang through the cockpit. It wasn't the alarm caused by an enemy locking onto us, but rather, the five-minute warning before we warped out.

"It's almost time," I declared. "I guess we should set up our weapons system so we can attack at a moment's notice."

"Right. I'll prepare over here, too."

"What should I do about the radar range?" Mimi asked.

"How about you set it to max for now?" *They're probably just gonna wait for us and hit us at maximum power.*

"No," Mei cut in. "I anticipate a close-range battle. It may be best to set it to a smaller range."

"For real?"

"Yes, if my expectations are correct." Mei said only that before going quiet.

Huh. A close-range battle? They're not gonna send in boats with reactive torpedoes, are they? I hope not: that would be tough. Like "one hit and we're dead" levels of tough.

Reactive torpedoes were slow, so they wouldn't hit us unless we were right in front of the enemy. They were weak to counterattacks too, so they were kinda just cool but useless weapons. Throwing a ton of ships in with them would just result in most of them dying without getting the chance to use them, so I'd expect them to *not* take that gamble.

"We'll be warping out soon!" Mimi announced as I pondered the coming battle.

"Sorry, I was just thinking. Anyway, I guess the best option is just to stay flexible and be ready to adapt."

"So…you don't have a plan," Elma complained. *What am I supposed to do? We don't know what'll happen until we warp in. There's only so much that one battleship can do beyond preparing for anything and everything.*

"Five…four…three…two…one… Now!" Mimi's cry echoed as the ship left hyperspace and appeared in normal space. She swiftly changed

from the hyperspace sensors to the regular ones.

Instead of just seeing Count Dalenwald's unit, a huge number of ships appeared on the radar. The unit immediately went on guard, and warnings came our way.

Based on the formation of the blips, the enemy ships were trying to surround us like sharks, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. That wasn't a normal formation. If they weren't careful, any one of them could collide with us head on. What were they doing?

"They're trying to slow us down. What are they after?" Elma said exactly what I had been thinking.

"Maybe they're planning to use a Singing Crystal like I did that one time?"

"I doubt it. I mean, you're the only one who would think to do that."

"Really? I think it's a neat way to use it!"

While Elma and I watched warily, Count Dalenwald's unit used wide-field communication to demand the enemy's identity. But they neither answered nor attacked us, simply continuing to circle around us and impede our movement.

The ships themselves were orthodox battleships, ranging from small to medium in size. A quick scan didn't reveal their affiliation, so they must have had some masking devices at work. Anyways, it was clear that they were up to no good.

Count Dalenwald issued a final warning: If they continued to impede us, then we would attack. The enemy continued to ignore us, and tension began to rise.

"Master Hiro, something's coming," Mimi warned. "It's coming in fast."

"What is it?" I asked. The *Krishna*'s radar had spotted something coming at us at super-high speed from outside of the encirclement. It was heading directly for the flagship that Count Dalenwald was aboard. "Is it trying to ram them?"

Having figured that much out, Count Dalenwald's unit activated their weapons systems and counterattacked. At the same time, the ships

encircling us did the same and began attacking his guard ships.

At any rate, we couldn't just sit here and watch, so I accelerated and headed for the flagship vessel. Mei was right; this would be a close-range battle centered around the flagship.

The mysterious object, using its thrusters to charge straight for the flagship, looked like a slender bullet.

"I've never seen a ship like that. *Damn*, those shields are tough!" Even a *Stella Online* addict like me had never seen that model. Deciding to just take it down and ask questions later, I blasted them with all four heavy lasers. Yet they were all stopped by the slender ship's shields. Those were some powerful shields for such a small ship.

"That is one of the imperial fleet's suppression ships," Mei explained.

"Suppression ships?"

"Yes. They are equipped with rams containing shield-exhausting devices, and use said rams to pierce the hulls of other ships. They then send soldiers into the enemy ship through the breach to suppress them. Suppression ships are equipped with powerful shields, propulsion, and generators, but they come with no weapons."

"What a weird ship…" I mused. So, it was like a manned torpedo?

Huh? Is that how they're planning to kill Chris and the count? Seriously? Why not make a more efficient weapon? Why would you ram them and try to fight face to face? This is nuts. What is this, The Great Panjandrum? The empire must be behind this.

"Those imperial nobles do love swordfights…" Elma groaned.

"Yes. *The Unfettered Emperor* is on its 2,406th season, to my recollection."

"Hold on. This infodump is gonna break my brain, I swear… Wait. Balthazar isn't on that thing, is he?"

"He's gotta be. Nobles like them would *love* to settle things with a final, dramatic swordfight."

"My head hurts…" Did hyperspace spit us out into some clown universe? I thought this was a hard sci-fi, not a comedy series. *A naval*

boarding? Why not just use a reactive warhead at that point? You'd have won by now if you did that! "Anyway, let's swat down that weirdo ship!"

That bizarre ship would get through…over my dead body! I decided to throw all my flak at that ship until it was full of holes. Unfortunately, or perhaps to be expected from such a specialized ship, even using my thrusters at maximum power wasn't enough for us to catch up to the suppression ship. Not only that, but none of our attacks could break through its shields.

"Damn it!" I swore. "It's seriously fast!"

"Looks like they used afterburners," Elma said. "Even the *Krishna* can't catch up to that."

Ignoring even the flagship's defensive fire, the suppression ship continued at maximum speed until it stabbed into the ship's belly. It seemed that strike alone was enough to take down its shields entirely. However, the other ships showed no signs of attacking the flagship; they were just working to stop the other ships from moving.

"This is just getting silly." The suppression ship and other forces must have been holding back to avoid taking any ships down, but as someone who lived a kill-or-be-killed life, I didn't like this. *This isn't a game, guys!*

"Remember, this is a critical mission," Mimi reminded me. "Just do your best."

"It's too much for me." I cried internally at her bluntness and flew toward the ship where Count Dalenwald and Chris were. The enemy's ships were inferior—apart from the suppression ship itself—but they were fighting well; the flagship's bodyguards were totally unable to protect it right now.

"What's with that ship, anyway?" I asked. "Are they stupid, or just ignorant? They could've won if they'd just put reactive warheads on that thing."

"The manufacturing cost of that ship is extremely high, so it is not worth the cost," Mei replied. "There are also ethical issues with using a manned ship to perform a suicide attack."

“I don’t see much of a difference between going in and self-destructing versus going in and fighting face to face against overwhelming numbers…” I muttered to myself as I approached the slender suppression ship, which was beautifully lodged into the flagship. *Oh my, it’s in so deep!* “So should I destroy this thing or what?”

“No,” Elma warned. “Right now, it’s the only thing plugging up the hole it just made. I’m sure the flagship has measures against sudden decompression, but we don’t wanna take any chances. If we’re not careful, the suppression ship could explode and destroy the whole flagship.”

“That wouldn’t be good. What drove them to make this ship, anyway…?”

The thing had thick shields, but a ship that small wouldn’t survive a battleship’s large-bore lasers even if all of its generator power was directed to the shields. If the construction cost was high, then it couldn’t be mass-produced. Face-to-face combat took a toll on the people fighting, too. This definitely wasn’t a strategy that could be used frequently.

If you absolutely needed to capture the enemy’s fanciest ship, I guess it could be a useful strategy… On second thought, nah: too risky. Battles between fleets were typically conducted at a distance via battleships and cruisers. They wouldn’t usually devolve into brawls like this.

You would hardly ever consider deploying the suppression ship; it was useless outside of niche cases like this. The fact that I had never seen it in *Stella Online* meant that it was probably a ship that only belonged to certain factions, much like the *Krishna*.

I could vaguely remember some players using ships which had powerful shields, rams with devices that nullified shields, and speed even greater than the *Krishna*’s to ram down ships in one blow. There are always crazy people who don’t care about practicality and do things just because they like them. I bet plenty of them attached drills to their ships, too.

“I’ve heard that the suppression ship is a result of lobbying from the imperial army’s former land military division and some nobles,” Mei informed me. “Incidentally, it has only been used in battle four times. This time will be a valuable fifth precedent.”

“How many times has it worked, anyway?”

“In terms of practical battle, this has been the third known success, giving it a sixty percent success rate. Based instead on how many of the ships have been built, it has a thirty percent success rate; the other seventy percent were destroyed before they saw battle. Many call it the noble’s overpriced casket, a jaw-droppingly expensive decoy, and the funniest weapon in the imperial fleet.”

“If Balthazar succeeded given a thirty percent chance and a single ship, I guess I should be surprised by his skill and luck, huh?”

“Personality aside, you gotta admit he’s a capable strategist,” Elma shrugged. “Without a wild card like you, he probably would’ve succeeded long ago.”

“He picked the wrong foe, indeed,” Mimi agreed.

Aw, girls, am I really that incredible? I’m just a slightly skilled mercenary blessed with a wonderful ship and crew.

“But for real, what do we do now?” I asked them. “The other ships can probably do just fine without us, so maybe we should go in to protect Chris and the others?”

“Eh, I dunno about that…” Elma said. “We wouldn’t want to jump in and end up fighting the flagship’s crew.”

“But what if Chris and her grandfather died because we sat here with our thumbs up our asses?”

“True, but…are you really gonna charge in for a risky face-to-face fight? It’s dangerous, y’know.” Elma seemed to be against it.

I wasn’t particularly keen on the plan either, but it would be a breach of my contract to not do everything I could. Besides, if we sat here and left Count Dalenwald and Chris to die, we’d be in big trouble. Not getting our daily 250,000 Ener payment would be the *least* of our concerns. Once Balthazar was officially the new Count Dalenwald, he would probably do anything in his power to get rid of us. Dealing with him now would leave us with the most secure future.

“Nah, let’s do it,” I decided. “We don’t want Balthazar somehow surviving. In the worst case where Count Dalenwald dies, we at least need to protect Chris and kill Balthazar, or it’ll hurt us down the line.”

And in the worst of the worst cases where both Count Dalenwald and Chris died, we *needed* Balthazar dead for the sake of a peaceful future.

"Mimi, send a docking request to the flagship," I commanded. "I'm grabbing my power armor and going in. Elma, I'll leave control of the *Krishna* to you. Once I'm in there, lock the hatch, put up the shields, and don't let anyone in. Mei, come with me."

"O-okay!"

"Ugh… Aye aye."

"Understood."

Mimi, Elma, and Mei all assented to my orders. They didn't seem too into it, but too bad. It was time for a fight. I handed over control to Elma and ran to the cargo room with Mei.

Chapter 7:
An Annoying Do-or-Die

HOW DID I END UP FIGHTING face-to-face in a universe where spaceships fly around with incredible firepower? I blamed Balthazar, along with that damned imperial army for making such a stupid ship. Like seriously, what the f*rk.

"Master Hiro, we'll be docking soon," Mimi informed me. "Enemy forces seem to be focused away from the hangar, so you won't have to worry immediately. But please be careful."

"Will do."

Even if there were enemies right outside, they wouldn't be able to destroy my power armor without some strong-ass weapons. Power armor was my favorite piece of gear, focused on bulk and firepower. Anti-laser, anti-corrosive, and quite bulletproof, the Class-III armor displayed incredible defense against all forms of attack. When the going got tough, I could even deploy shields to bolster its defenses.

"I will protect you, Master. Please, leave them to me." Mei seemed almost excited.

I mean, she *looked* just as cool and collected as usual. Her tone of voice wasn't exactly bubbly, either. But I could tell from her aura that she was raring and ready to go. *Okay, you're ready: I get it. Can you stop swinging that laser launcher around, though? That's not how you use it.*

The reason Mei could even use a laser launcher meant for power armor was because her generator was set up to supply energy to the weapon. Like a suit of power armor, she was equipped with a micro-generator. Hers had even more output than power armor, though, so she could use heavy armaments without needing to wear the armor. The power cable that energized the laser launcher extended from her hip, by the way. Was there an outlet there? I never saw anything like that when I saw her naked.

Weird.

Just then, the ship rocked slightly. It seemed we had landed.

“We’ve docked,” Elma announced. “I know we should put our all into our work, but you only have one life. Don’t waste it.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

“Also, evade a noble’s sword at all costs. It’ll cut right through your power armor.”

“Huh?!” *Hold up wait a minute! Nobody told me that! Is it too late to change my mind?!*

“Also,” Elma repeated, “be careful. Nobles are often equipped with cybernetics that greatly increase their information-processing abilities.”

“Define *careful*. And what’s the danger to me from that, specifically?”

“Basically, they have insane reaction time. They can deflect lasers with their swords and even fling them back at you.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me…”

*For real? They deflect lasers and fling them back? What are these people, J*di? I don’t remember any cybernetic J*di, not that I’m all that knowledgeable about that franchise.*

“But,” Elma continued, “they do have trouble keeping it up for a long time due to the physical strain on their bodies. You can do the same thing, right? That’s why I thought you were a noble at first.”

“I can? Oh, yeah, I can…”

She means that thing where everything slows down when I hold my breath, right? Okay, so it must be the same thing. Apparently, it looks like I’m firing at super-high speeds when I do that.

“Well, no matter how fast a noble is, he only has one sword. No problem.” With that, I showed off today’s weapons.

I was equipped with two power armor-grade split lasers, which you could say were totally overpowered in anti-personnel combat. These babies shot twelve rounds at once, all just as powerful as any infantryman’s laser rifle. Basically, they were shotguns in laser form. Having two at once meant I could shoot twenty-four lasers simultaneously.

Shot for shot, the laser launcher was stronger, but it was too big for me to swing around in a small space while wearing power armor. In a closed space, the double split lasers were much easier to handle.

“Okay, we’re going in,” I declared. “Mimi, let Dalenwald’s crew know not to shoot me. Got it?”

“Understood! Be careful!”

“I will handle navigation,” Mei told me.

“Awesome, thank you. Let’s go!” We opened the hatch and leapt out of the *Krishna*.

It was a little far from the hangar to where enemies were deployed, so I ran, my armor loudly clanking the whole way. The sound may have been dull, but I was even faster than when I was unencumbered. The shock absorbers and artificial muscles on the legs were working quite well, indeed.

But Mei ran further ahead of me, her prim and clean maid clothing fluttering as she went with her hefty laser launcher in hand. What an unbelievable sight! Not even in B-movies would you see a combination like us: an evil-looking guy with power-type power armor and a heavily armed maid. What a dynamic duo.

“The battlefield is up ahead and to the left.”

“Let’s charge in. I’ll go out in front and put up a shield.”

“Understood. Then I shall watch for an opening and mow them down,” Mei answered as we turned left.

There, we saw soldiers wearing body armor up against maids and butlers, both sides in heated battle behind their respective barricades. *Oh, that’s right. The crew here are dressed like servants. What a surreal sight.*

But the maid/butler allied forces were being pushed back by the armored soldiers. On closer inspection, some enemies were wearing power armor as well.

“Power armor?!” One enemy soldier shouted upon seeing me. “I thought they didn’t have any deployed!” They seemed shocked by my sudden appearance. The maids and butlers turned around, equally surprised. *I didn’t mean to scare you guys, sorry. Just…passing through.*

“Raaaagh!” I used the suit’s jump thrusters to fly overhead, leaping into the space between barricades. The enemy soldiers immediately recovered from their astonishment and fired at me with laser rifles, but my super-heavy power armor—the Rikishi Mk. III—was unfazed by mere laser rifle fire.

I didn’t just let them fire at me unopposed. I wildly fired both split lasers at the soldiers hiding behind their barricade. One split laser gun had the firepower of twelve enemies, so with two of them, I wielded the power of twenty-four.

“Whoooooa!”

“Damn it, this is a mess! Barst, suppress that giant oaf!” the apparent enemy commander screamed, prompting an enemy to jump over the barricade and run my way.

Hmm. Middleweight, standard power armor. It’s probably military grade. Against an enemy without power armor, it would have ample defense and mobility. Perfectly acceptable firepower, too. But that won’t beat me. Mobility means nothing in a small space like this. When it comes to face-to-face battles on spaceships, what you really want from power armor is overwhelming strength and defense.

“Ahup!” As the enemy charged in, I activated my shields and went for a high-speed shoulder tackle. This was the Rikishi Mk. III’s killer move: the Buchikamashi function.

“Gah!” The enemy’s power armor was blown away, smashing the barricade behind him and taking his friends down with him like bowling pins. They were clearly shaken, obviously not expecting one blow to take out their power armor.

“Mei!”

“I will handle it.” On my signal, Mei leapt forward and joined me in mowing down the remaining enemies with her laser launcher.

Mei’s really incredible, for real. She handles that heavy launcher like it’s nothing, easily obliterating enemy and barricade alike with focused fire. You would think that shooting from the hip like that would make it hard to aim, but her shots were wonderfully accurate.

“Charge!!!” I ordered.

“Sir!” Mei replied.

I charged into enemy lines, kicking aside the half-destroyed barricade. I then used my two split lasers, the Rikishi Mk. III’s own shoulder lasers, and my own two fists to deal with the remaining forces. Humans were simply too powerless in the face of power armor’s overwhelming defense and firepower.

“Haaah!” Meanwhile, the fragile-only-at-a-glance Mei swung her power armor-sized laser launcher with ease, blowing away armored men like leaves. I heard some pretty awful rips and cracks.

“Damn iiiiiiit!”

“Hmph!!!” I grunted.

“Urk…!”

I stomped on the enemy power armor as he tried to stand back up, activating the Shiko impact amplification device and crushing his chest piece to bits. His life was in real danger now, but neutralizing him was my only choice as long as he still wanted to fight.

This was a life-or-death battle.

Come to think of it, I really am just killing people without a second thought. Okay, don't think too deeply about it. Just think about saving Chris and killing Balthazar.

"Let's keep going!"

"Yes."

After destroying the enemies and their barricade, we left cleanup work to the maids and butlers so we could continue. *I just hope things go smoothly from here.*

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We'd only gone a little further in before we came to a halt. The path ahead of us was completely stained with dark, red blood.

"This is just…" I was at a loss.

"They've been massacred."

The formerly white, now crimson corridor was littered with severed human body parts. The gory sight almost made me vomit, but my power armor's vomit suppression function stopped it. Yet the roiling in my stomach did not stop. We passed through, careful not to step on any corpses.

"Did a noble's sword do all this…?" I asked. "I sure don't wanna end up like that."

"Worry not," Mei reassured me. "As long as I am here, I swear that such a fate will not befall you." I appreciated how reliable she was, but I did *not* want to see her cut apart like that either. *I'd better finish this as best I can.*

"Also, that location showed traces of lasers on the ceiling and walls. I believe that the enemy does indeed have cybernetic implants," she added.

"That's a pain. But hey, there's no way they can defend against two split lasers at once."

You might be able to predict a laser's path based on where the enemy's barrel is pointed if they use laser guns or rifles, but a split laser sensed how hot its polarizing lens was and made minute adjustments to its

firing angle with each shot. Besides, one or two swords alone couldn't protect you from twenty-four shots at once. Lasers shot literally at the speed of light, so once they were fired, you couldn't dodge them.

It's cool, it's cool. Just show that sword-flailing heathen what modern civilization is capable of! Ha ha ha!!!

"I hear the sound of swords clashing ahead."

"Let's hurry. Actually…Mei, you lead the way. You're faster than me, right?"

"Yes. Understood."

Mei agreed and ran down the corridor at incredible speed. *Why is the corridor dented slightly where she just ran? Is she* that *fast?* I knew her specs based on the catalog, but it was a real shock to witness her power up close and personal for the first time. And she had a specialized fighting program, too. *Holy crap. I don't think I could beat her in a fight even* with *my power armor.*

While I ran, clanking and clunking along the way, my parabolic sensors picked up something like a laser launcher firing. Mei must have engaged the enemy. Red light ran across the open door in front of me. She was really letting them have it. Was the battle up there not finished yet?

I peeked inside the room to size up the situation before charging in. It seemed to be a large foyer where Count Dalenwald stood ready with his sword, alongside Chris and their subordinates. Count Dalenwald had some cuts here and there, making for a sad sight. But fortunately, he didn't seem to have lost any body parts.

And in front of them, Mei was in heated battle with many foes.

"You damned sex toy!" one of them shouted.

"Your remarks may be true, but I believe you should cease making them. They only depict you in a negative light."

While a man with a sword screamed at her, Mei remained as calm as ever and continued to launch lasers at him. The lasers, set to spread mode, swarmed toward the man and…didn't hit him? His two swords deflected them. *Huh…?*

The man facing Mei held a longsword in his right hand and a short one in his left, deflecting any lasers that were about to hit him and evading the rest with ease. *You're kidding, right? He really is a J*di!*

"Mei, fire again. We'll suppress him with crossfire."

"Understood." Upon Mei's confirmation, I leapt into the foyer where the battle—*huh*?!

"Hngh!" The sword-wielding man grunted, somehow closing in on me as soon as I jumped in.

"Gah!" I reflexively tried to smack him with my split laser gun, but incredibly, he blocked the strike and jumped back. While he was at it, he sliced the gun clean in two with his dagger. "You little…" I spat. "How dare you cleave my split laser?!"

"Hngh!" He grunted again. I discarded my cleaved split laser and used the one still in my left hand, along with my two shoulder lasers, to fire away at this damned dual-wielding menace. "Y-you dare turn such brutish weapons upon a *nobleman*?!" he growled.

"Why should I care, jerkoff?!" I continued my merciless laser fire, putting the man on the defensive. I may have lost one split laser, but with my shoulder cannons in the mix, I still had the power of about fourteen men. "Raaah! Diiiiiie!!!"

Shooting from a distance meant that my lasers would spread out more, so I maintained adequate distance while still staying close enough to shower him with laser fire. *Tch! This guy's even got a portable shield generator! So many of my lasers should be direct hits, but they haven't so much as singed him!*

Not that I cared. No matter how high capacity your shield device, it had to run out of juice eventually. If my first or second shots didn't hit him, then maybe my third, fourth, tenth, or twentieth shot would!

"You just gonna watch?! Help me shoot!" I screamed at Count Dalenwald's maids and butlers, who held lasers but stood in shock at what was going on. Mei had shifted her laser launcher into focus mode and was taking carefully aimed shots at the dual-wielder. Laser launchers had incredible strength when focused—one shot would easily exhaust the man's shields. *Nice! Now that's the spirit.*

"Damn it!" Exposed to this focused fire, there was a *pop* as the man's portable shield ran out and exploded. Or did he put up a smokescreen? He was hidden by white smoke, which spread and filled the room at great speed. *I see… So he's trying to attenuate the lasers while also making it harder for us to see. That's a smart move.*

But it was pointless. I held my breath and lifted my arm in slowed time, aiming carefully for my mark.

"Hiyaaah!"

"Ack!" The split laser, thrown by my power armor's overwhelming strength, smashed perfectly into the dual-wielder as he tried to dash for Count Dalenwald.

Though he used an anti-laser smokescreen and made it harder to see, neither of those made things too much harder for me when I wore my power armor. Power armor didn't just have light sensors; it also had infrared and other such high-capacity sensors installed. A simple smokescreen couldn't blind me.

I erected my shields and clunked on over to the fallen dual-wielder.

"Fool!" He noticed my approach and tried to slice me with his longsword, but it was deflected by my shields. The nobles' swords were damn sharp, but he wouldn't be able to get through my shield—not without either exhausting its power with a laser or missile hit, or piercing it with the high kinetic energy of flak shrapnel.

No matter how sharp his sword or fast his swings, as long as this guy didn't have cybernetic implants or cyborg parts, his slashes couldn't hurt me. I was a little afraid that he might be able to cut my shield, but he couldn't. *Thank God for that one.*

"Right back at you, *fool*!" I grabbed the dual-wielder's wrist. He immediately tried to cut my arm off with his left-hand dagger, but it was too late.

"Aieeeeeeee!" He screamed and began to tremble. I had activated the high-pressure electric shock devices installed in both hands of my power armor, the Harite function—more commonly known as the Rikishi Collider in *Stella Online*. If a human without power armor got hit by this, they were done for. If it didn't kill them outright, they would at least faint.

"Haaah…" Smoke rose slightly from the man's body as he collapsed.

"Strip him of his gear," I ordered.

"Yes." Mei ran over and kicked the dual-wielder's swords away from him. She also tossed aside the strange devices attached to his mantle and other body parts. I didn't know what any of them were, but if Mei took them, then they must've been dangerous.

"So, should we kill the guy?" I asked Count Dalenwald as I gently placed my foot on the man's head, ready to crush it into dust at the count's command. He must have been that Balthazar guy. *He is, right? Please tell me he is.*

“Arrest that man.” Count Dalenwald’s stern expression did not falter as he gestured with his eyes to the maids and butlers around him. The butlers rushed over with what looked like a collar. They placed it around the dual-wielder’s neck and carried him off somewhere.

Meanwhile, the maids recovered the man’s swords and brought them over to me. *What do you want* me *to do with them?*

“A pity that you’ve sullied our duel,” said Count Dalenwald, “but in the end, you and that doll defeated him. As such, you will receive his swords.”

“I don’t get it. Mei, what the hell is going on?”

“Noble feuds can be settled in many ways, but I believe that Count Dalenwald and his son Balthazar have chosen a duel to decide their ultimate fate. We interfered in their duel, and by assisting him, we have defeated Balthazar. This means that Count Dalenwald has won, and that he has the power to choose Balthazar’s fate. Also, it is common sense for the winner of a duel between nobles to take the loser’s weapons as a token of pride. Disappointed by our interference, Count Dalenwald does not feel it is right to take Balthazar’s weapons. Instead, he wishes to give them to you, the *true* victor.”

“Uh-huh… That’s a bit too much to process. Basically, I can have these swords?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“Okay.”

If Mei said it was fine, then it must be fine, right? With that, I accepted the two swords. My power armor must have made it look awfully strange. A sumo fighter holding Western-style swords was just too incongruous. Maybe it would look better if I had a super-long *nodachi* or something.

“What are you gonna do about *him*?” I asked.

“He will receive proper punishment,” Count Dalenwald said curtly and turned around to walk away.

The maids tending to his wounds rushed to follow him. After seeing him off, I recovered my two split lasers—the one sliced in half, and the one

I threw at Balthazar. *That damned dual-wielder… How could you do that to my beloved gun?!* I cursed him mentally and affixed the two swords to the back of my power armor. The power armor could hold weapons on its back, powered by some mysterious, magical force.

Nah, I'm just kidding. It was actually equipped with automatic weapon mounts. They just didn't stand out in-game, so it looked like they were floating behind you. Most of this universe's tactical armor had similar technology, but it was heavy. Besides, I usually only walked around with laser guns.

I held my literally split gun in both hands and wondered how we'd clean all this up. Meanwhile, Chris approached me and greeted me.

"Well done," she congratulated.

"You too, Chris. Are you hurt at all?"

"No, sir."

I then noticed something hanging from Chris' hip. It was a little too big to be called a knife. A self-defense dagger, perhaps? "I can't give you a pat on the head when I'm wearing power armor. Anyway, glad to see you're safe."

"It's thanks to you that I didn't have to use this kaiken dagger."

"I'm, uh…not gonna ask how you would've used it."

Assuming the kaiken daggers here were like the ones I knew, they were used for self-defense as well as a way for women to commit suicide to protect their pride and dignity. If Count Dalenwald had lost and I hadn't come to help, then Chris might have had to use it on herself. *It's a damn good thing I was here.*

"Oh, I'd better contact the girls," I said and switched on my comms. "Elma, Mimi, everything's okay over here. Balthazar is…well, not dead, but dealt with. Count Dalenwald put some kind of collar on him and took him away, so we should be good."

"Understood," Elma replied. "So, you didn't kill him?"

"I kinda interrupted them in the middle of a duel. I used my power armor's electric attack, Balthazar fainted, and they arrested him. Count Dalenwald told me to let him live, so I did just that."

“I see. Are you hurt at all?”

“Nope, but one of my split lasers did get cut clean in half.”

“That’s a shame but be glad it was the *only* thing you lost. Better than an arm, a leg, or your stomach, right?”

“No kidding.” If that sword was sharp enough to cut my gun in half with one swing, then it might really be able to sever my power armor. It was definitely sharper than any blade I knew. *Thank god for shields!*

“Make sure you come back safe, please,” Mimi chimed in.

“For sure. Let’s eat something good tonight! We’ll finally get a well-earned rest.”

“Great!”

Her excited voice reminded me of something. “Oh, yeah. Chris, do you wanna come to our ship? We’re gonna have a job-well-done party now that the Balthazar business is finished.”

“A party? That sounds lovely. I’d love to come!”

“I say ‘party,’ but it’s probably just gonna involve us having our automatic cooker make some party food. But do feel free to come along.”

“Okay. I’ll do my best to convince my grandfather.” Chris wrung her hands energetically. Were Mimi’s mannerisms infecting her? I guess they did spend a lot of time together.

“By the way, what’s happening with the battle?” I asked Elma.

“They know Balthazar went down, so it looks like it’s over. Most of the enemy surrendered or ran away.”

“Gotcha. I’ll make my way back now. Chris, we’re docked in your hangar, so come on over when you get permission.”

“Understood. I will ask him soon.”

“Mei, can you guard Chris?” I asked.

“Very well.”

I figured Balthazar’s defeat would be the end of all this, but I had Mei stick with her just in case. She also had maids alongside her with laser guns and rifles, but it never hurt to be extra careful. I handed my intact split

laser to Mei and took the cumbersome laser launcher back with me to the ship.

I remained wary of any battles still going on along the way back, but it seemed like the invading enemy soldiers had been defeated, so I could rest easy for now.

"Don't take things too easy, Hiro," Elma warned me.

I had let my guard down now that the big bad was defeated. Either I was restless, or I was too lax. *I'd better tighten up,* I thought. *They say you shouldn't let your guard down just because you've won.*

I clanked all through the halls, glancing toward the ship's maids and butlers as I headed toward the flagship's hangar. The flagship's carrier-borne planes were returning one by one, as well. Some made it back without losing their shields, but some were so beaten up that I was shocked that they were still intact.

They were the most standard of imperial small battleships, with two weapon mounts capable of equipping small laser cannons or multi-cannons, along with two seeker missile pods. The ships were fast and highly maneuverable. Their shields and plating weren't great, but they were good ships overall. On the other hand, their cruising ability and cargo capacity were too inadequate for a merc to use. Some people did favor them; they looked cool, after all. Very battleship chic.

My *Krishna* was twice as big as them. It still qualified as a small craft, but it was pretty close to medium—not that it was comparable to them in capability.

I passed through the hangar, which was bustling with crew members resupplying, maintenance, and rescuing injured pilots, as I returned to the *Krishna*. I certainly appreciated people giving me a wide berth, given my power armor and huge laser launcher. After climbing the ladder and opening the hatch, I was aboard the ship, where Mimi awaited me.

"There you are!"

"I'm back. Here, let me get this power armor off real quick."

"Okay!" Mimi sounded casual, but she was following close behind me. *Are you worried? I'm not hurt or anything.*

After arriving in our cargo hold, I placed the laser launcher into the weapon rack in the corner, threw the broken split laser into the junk box, and stripped off the power armor.

"Ah, sweet freedom."

"You must be tired after all that!" Mimi quickly offered me a damp towel, which I accepted and used to wipe the sweat from my face and neck. The power armor was air conditioned, but sometimes, you just gotta sweat.

"Thanks. Oh, check these out." I showed Mimi the pair of Balthazar's swords mounted on the back of my power armor.

"Swords? Those are the ones carried by nobility, aren't they?"

"Yep. Count Dalenwald gave them to me after Mei and I beat the tar out of Balthazar."

"Is it really so easy to get them…?" Mimi was at a loss. *Yeah, I can understand that. But they're mine now! I had no reason to refuse them, and Mei said it was fine, so why not?*

"I dunno, but he did give them to me."

"I-I see…"

Despite her confusion, Mimi was very interested in swords. They were a status symbol of imperial nobles to her, something that she could only dream of seeing. To compare it to Japanese sensibilities…they're kind of like a Diet member's badge? Sort of…? Anyway, it's something an ordinary person would never get their hands on.

"Wanna hold one?" I offered.

"Are you sure?"

"Why not? Oh, but they're sharp as hell, so be very careful."

"Okay!"

I handed Mimi the dagger and took the long one for myself. It was thinner than I'd thought, and much more so than the one Serena carried around. Were they equally sharp? I couldn't exactly compare them. It was double-edged, so the blade wasn't very wide, and the tip was super sharp.

The sword likely emphasized lightness and agility over raw power. Not that sharpness was especially influenced by its width, but a light sword

probably had the advantage in that regard, right?

"It's quite heavy!" Mimi noted.

"Is it?" I sheathed the longsword and traded with her. Compared to the longsword, this one had a thicker blade. It seemed sharp, too…but it looked to be more sturdy than anything else. If I had to guess, it was less an offensive weapon and more of a tool.

"What are you doing?" came an exasperated voice. I turned to the cargo hold and found one annoyed-looking Elma, so I raised the dagger for her to see.

"Just checking out our loot," I replied.

"Loot…? Huh? Did you earn that?"

"Yeah. I don't really get it, but we beat up Balthazar and saved Count Dalenwald, and he let us have them."

"Wow. That easy, huh?" Elma grumbled to herself, apparently deep in thought.

"Should I not have accepted it?"

"That's not it, but…meh. If they need anything, they'll let you know. Anyway, we gotta get ready for the party, right? Put those things away and start getting ready. Hiro, go take a shower."

"Okay!"

"Aight!"

Obeying Elma's command, we sheathed the swords and threw them into the weapon case before getting to our own business. Mimi and Elma were bringing up food and drinks from the cargo room, and it was up to me to go bathe like a good boy.

Once I was done with that, it would be time for a victory party!

Chapter 8:
Chris and Mimi

"MMM, THAT WAS a good meal!" I said, patting my belly.

At our victory party, we ate the Steel Chef 5's pizza and fried chicken to our hearts' content. After that, I took another bath and headed to my room.

The party was great. We had an incredibly savory meal made with artificial meat and had a great time. We were veritable clubbers—or at least Elma was, with how much she was drinking and chatting.

I was good and full, so I left the other two cuties and our capable maid to take care of the still-drinking sad elf, and bathed again before coming back. That fight exhausted me much more than I had imagined, both physically and mentally. I was dead tired for most of the party.

"What a pain…" I groaned. I operated my bedside console to display what the *Krishna*'s light sensors were currently picking up.

On the holo-display, I saw the state of the hangar we were stationed in. Maintenance personnel and robots busily buzzed

around the hangar. We were enjoying a party, but Count Dalenwald's men, women, and bots were all still overwhelmed by cleanup work.

According to Chris, this ambush was made possible by Balthazar's co-conspirators in the Kormat System's own fleet—people who should've been working for the count. Thanks to that, Count Dalenwald and the Kormat System were in great turmoil.

Not that it mattered to a mercenary like me. We had been ordered to stand by in Count Dalenwald's flagship for now, so as long as we did that, we were free to do what we wanted. Though we would have to launch if he ordered us to, of course.

Once they finished cleaning up the battle zones, Count Dalenwald's unit would head to Kormat Prime, the Kormat System's central colony. They would then hand off the ships they towed there, treat the injured,

repair their damaged ships, and do other such odd jobs. Meanwhile, we would be on standby.

We were in the count's own backyard now. The enemy ringleader had been captured, so I figured we would be released from duty. But Count Dalenwald was surprisingly diligent.

Just as I spread out to relax in bed, my doorbell rang. The door to the room was airtight and sturdy, so a simple knock wasn't enough for a person inside to hear. As such, it came installed with a doorbell, although Elma would still bang on the door as hard as she could.

Wondering if Mimi or Mei had come to visit, I opened the door to see Chris there. "Good evening," she greeted me.

I wasn't expecting her, so I was just in boxers and a tank top—just my underwear, basically. "Hold on a sec," I said.

"Okay. I'm sorry to bother you while you're resting."

Talking to her in my underwear would be silly, so I decided to at least put on some pants. Chris politely looked away.

"So, er, what brings you here?" I asked.

"I don't have any particular business…but I did want to talk to you."

"Oh?" It was kind of a strange answer, but I had no reason to refuse her. I guided Chris to a table and chairs near my bed. As a man, I certainly couldn't have a noblewoman sit on my bed. Though honestly, just letting her into my room felt wrong in and of itself. "Sorry, I don't really have any tea or anything. Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

I reached into the fridge and pulled out a black, non-carbonated, sugar water-like drink. I then set it out on the table and had some for myself. *Mmm. It doesn't have that kick, but I do love how it feels inside me.*

"Uh…" I struggled with what to say. "Ah… All's well that ends well, right? We're out of danger, so that's certainly nice."

"Yes. Thank you so much. My grandfather praised you, too."

"Did he really?" That old man always looked mad, what with those deep, angry wrinkles in his brow. But I suppose he was just acknowledging

my skill as a mercenary.

"Yes. He looked unhappy, but he said that your strength was true."

"Huh. Guess I can appreciate that." I then stood up, having remembered something, and reached into the closet by my bed for a certain necklace with a lilac jewel. I'd kept it right in the pocket of my favorite jacket. "I oughta return this to you soon."

"Oh…" Chris looked upon the glimmering necklace in my hand. She seemed sad, even lonely, as she did.

"I'm gonna keep working as your knight for a little longer, but Count Dalenwald paid out my reward for protecting you, so I think it's time to give the necklace back. It's important to you, right?"

After a moment's hesitation, she answered, "Yes." I handed over the necklace, which she obediently accepted and squeezed in her little hand. With that, I sat back in my chair opposite her.

"Erm, I…"

"Yeah?"

"I… I love you, Hiro." Chris blushed bright red, still clinging to the necklace. Tears built up in the corners of her black eyes.

"…Okay." I had a feeling that was the case, honestly. We had slept next to one another once. She was in her early teens, but she was a lady with a high-quality noble upbringing. She wouldn't have slept beside me if she didn't at least like me.

I could see why she might feel that way about me. Truth aside, from her point of view, I was like a prince on a white horse who'd come to save her from danger. Except I was just on a small black battleship instead of a gallant white steed.

To a girl in a sensitive period of her life, a man who would protect her was a reasonable target for her affection. It would only be a passing feeling, but to totally brush her off would be too mean. To her, this no doubt felt serious. I could only imagine how much courage she had to muster to tell me how she felt.

"I appreciate that you feel that way. It's not every day that a guy gets to hear that from such a cute girl. But I can't say much more than—Aww,

c’mon. Don’t cry.”

Tears started gushing from her eyes, so I hurriedly brushed them away with my fingers. *Sorry I don’t have a handkerchief around. You can tell I’m not good at this.*

“Look, there are a lot of…circumstances. That goes for you and your noble duties, too. Balthazar’s sure to get disowned, so without you, Count Dalenwald won’t have an heir.” They could maybe give the title to someone outside of the direct family, but I wasn’t sure if they were willing to go that far. “I really doubt Count Dalenwald would be okay with you being with some random bozo like me. Not that it would be okay if he said yes, either. I’m not planning to give up mercenary work right now.”

If Count Dalenwald was somehow fine with a relationship between us, I suppose I would become a noble. But would my ambition of living on a residential planet and drinking soda all day come true? Maybe it would, but that felt wrong. I wanted to earn that freedom with my own hands.

“Truly…?” Chris urged. “Even if I was willing to leave my family, is it still impossible?”

“Yeah. Honestly, that would probably piss off your granddad so much that he would come and kill me. Sorry, but I’m not willing to give up my life for you.”

Chris started crying even harder. What I had just said was pretty much a final no. Put more bluntly, I had completely rejected her. Like I said, I wasn’t willing to give up the mercenary life with Mimi and Elma just for her. If Count Dalenwald came after us, the girls would be at risk. As a man, and as owner of the ship, I couldn’t expose my girls—my crewmates—to such danger.

Put frankly, I cared more about our life together than Chris’ feelings. I did have to feel bad for her, though. I used my terminal to summon Mei. Before long, she appeared and looked to me, and then to the girl suppressing sobs next to me.

“Sorry, Mei,” I sighed.

“It’s okay. Leave it to me,” Mei said, taking the crying girl out of my room.

I probably should've consoled her myself, but unfortunately, I wasn't equipped with the romance skills necessary to console a girl I had spurned myself. How awful could one man be, pushing all of his troubles onto Mei?

"Uuuugh…" I heaved another great sigh and dove into bed. *I'm just gonna go to sleep. Let's do that.* Tormented by images of Chris sobbing, I did my best to drift off to sleep.

***

I woke up from my frustrated sleep. My head and shoulders felt awfully heavy, and I had a strange headache. Basically, I was in awful condition. I had spurned an innocent girl's heartfelt emotions just to protect myself and my lifestyle. Realizing this anew, my heart sank.

There were a million excuses. Her grandfather-slash-patriarch wouldn't accept it, I would have to give up my life as a mercenary, and I would probably have to break up with Mimi and Elma.

But maybe the count would say yes, and I could still blow-up pirates in space with my *Krishna* even without mercenary work, and Mimi and Elma could be like, concubines or whatever. Could I still truly enjoy my life without care if all that happened? I certainly don't think so. Married into the family or not, being a noble meant a lot of limitations. No doubt Chris would suffer, too.

That just meant I would need to support her all the more, but honestly, I didn't have the slightest idea of how to carry myself in noble—

"Hup!"

"Wha…?!"

There was a cute noise of exertion as someone pressed some soft, heavy *things* into my back. *What's this?!* I struggled and writhed to find out which traitor had awoken me, and I found bright-brown eyes staring at me. Though they remained fixed on me, they wavered with unease.

"Mimi." I greeted her, but she said nothing and buried her face into my chest. *What is she, a puppy?* I imagined her brown hair adorned with

dog ears. “What’s up?” I scratched her head, prompting her to rest her chin on my chest and look me in the eye. Her eyes quickly filled with tears.

“I…I…”

“Seriously though, what’s up?” Totally confused, I wiped away her tears. Yet that only made her cry for real. Mimi buried her head in my chest again, and so I continued to pat her head until her wails finally subsided.

Is she done? I wondered to myself as I looked down at her. She was sniffing hard, snot leaking from her nose. “C’mon, babe. Don’t mess up your pretty face like that.”

“Bleh…”

I grabbed some recyclable wet wipes from my nightstand and wiped the area around Mimi’s nose. Once that was done, I tossed it into a specialized bin, where it would automatically be turned into a fresh wet wipe once again. *I still have no idea how that works.*

We then waited for Mimi to calm down, still sniffling and on the verge of tears as I stroked her hair. As we lay together, I realized that Chris’ gloomy image was fading from my mind. I felt a little cruel, but at the same time, I realized more than ever that life with Mimi and Elma was what truly brought me peace.

“Mimi,” I said.

“…Yeah?”

“I think being with you calms me the most.”

“Waaaah!” Mimi started crying again. *You’re a real crier today, huh?* I smirked inwardly as I continued to stroke her. “I’m sorry for bothering you…”

“Don’t worry about it.” The only sacrifice was the shirt I was wearing. One trip to the washing machine, and it would be nice and spiffy again. Though I guess I did lose a few wet wipes. It would take a while for them to get restored, after all. “So, why were you crying?” I asked, prompting more tears to well up in her eyes.

But Mimi held back this time and began to mutter. “Um… Mei told me about you and Chris.”

“Yeah?”

“I was just…really happy that you chose me and Elma over her.”

“Oh. Er, what?” I could see she was happy, but not how that was related to her crying a whole river. *Oh, could that be it?* I thought to myself, but I couldn’t be certain.

“I was happy that Chris lost. That you chose us over her! It made me think I was such a meanie… Eventually, I got all lonely from ruminating alone in my room, so I just wondered how sweet you would look if you got all worried about me, and…!”

“Ooo…kay. There, there.” I pulled Mimi into a hug and resumed my stroking as the tears flowed anew. She just couldn’t forgive herself for being happy that I ended up hurting her friend like that.

“It wasn’t supposed to go like this. I thought you would be sad, too, and I wanted to make you feel better…but now you’re just consoling me. I never knew I was such a mean, shameful, awful girl…” Mimi exhaled the longest sigh into my chest. I noticed that my eyes were starting to get a little damp, too. Another shirt was lost to tears and snot, but hey, no big deal.

“Come on, now. I was feeling the lowest of the low, but you brought me back up to ‘just a tiny bit worse than usual.’ You did a good job, Mimi. Don’t beat yourself up too much.”

Mimi looked up at me with teary eyes, sniffling. *Stop doing that: I already wiped your tears away! Fine, ugh, I’ll do it again. Blow your nose, girl, before I run out of wet wipes. You’re using them up faster than they replenish! How are you doing that?!*

“I’m a little hungry. How about we go to the cafeteria?”

“Okay…”

I got Mimi out of bed and changed shirts again. We then headed for the cafeteria, throwing my shirts into the combo washer-dryer along the way. I ignored Mimi’s apologetic look.

In the cafeteria, Elma sipped at a glass of something alcoholic, while Mei stood by next to her.

“Wow, that was fast,” Elma said. “Mimi, why’s your face all red?”

“I will deal with this at once,” Mei declared. “Miss Mimi, please sit over here.” As soon as she saw Mimi’s face, she sat next to the poor girl and began working on something.

“You seem calm, Elma.”

“Duh. Not like we can do anything about it.” She placed her glass on the table and offered a wry grin. “Realistically, Count Dalenwald wouldn’t want you near Chris. And I doubt she has time for you, anyway.”

“How so?” I raised an eyebrow, confused by that last statement.

“With the proper heir—Chris’ father—dead, and with Balthazar dealt with, Chris is probably gonna inherit their territory. Count Dalenwald could live a long time with the right treatment, but that still has its limits. If he died suddenly, he would just be leaving poor Chris as the new countess. Might as well plan for that eventuality, so he’s probably gonna rush Chris’ education.”

“I see.”

“They’re gonna teach her how to be a noble and a countess, all under heavy supervision. She doesn’t have time to fuss over love. Lucky for her, she still has time until she’s formally of age, so she’ll probably be educated in time. But in return, she pretty much has no freedom.”

“That’s kinda sad in and of itself.”

“That’s what being imperial nobility means. You get the power of a noble, but you also get the *responsibility* of one. I do feel bad for her, but…” Elma glanced over at Mei, who was currently applying some sort of towel around Mimi’s red, inflamed eyes.

“But?” I urged.

“Nothing. I hope nothing happens.”

“Hold on! What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Out here, machine intelligence kinda…prioritizes fulfillment in romance. They’re basically obsessed with happy endings.” Elma’s words were disconcerting, made worse by her unpleasant gaze toward Mei.

“Love will save the universe,” Mei responded coolly, her reply just as disconcerting. *Hold up! For real, Mei, what in God’s name did you say to Chris?*

“How old was that girl, again?” Elma wondered. “Twelve-ish? In three years, she’ll be of age. I just hope she changes her mind by then.”

“Don’t worry, Elma. He’ll be head over heels for us long before that time comes.” Mimi wrung her fists, having fully recovered thanks to Mei’s help.

“Hmph,” Elma replied dismissively, her long ears turning just a little redder. While Mimi had recovered, and Elma seemed as cool as ever, I was absolutely *not* calm at all.

“Mei, what did you tell Chris?” I asked.

“Nothing that you should worry about.”

“Just tell me.”

“Very well,” Mei responded. “As Lady Chris is nobility, and she will be the indisputable next Countess Dalenwald, I simply advised her that she will be free to use her power to keep you as a lover.” She was calm, but her words were terrifying.

“Mei, I seriously don’t plan on being a noble—”

“Yes, you’ve said that before. You do not want to be a noble because you wish to keep your freedom. But there are ways to deal with that.” She grinned just slightly, a bone-chilling smile.

What? Is she enjoying *this? I don’t know what she’s planning, but I’m spooked!*

“You have no need to fear. All I do is for the sake of your pleasure and fortune, after all.”

“She’s right!” Mimi chimed in. “You have to trust in Mei. She’s a good person!” She seemed awfully fond of Mei these days.

“True. She probably won’t do anything to hurt you, so don’t worry too much, whether she’s a ‘person’ or not.” Elma seemed to not care, as if she’d given up on the subject. I felt her usual bend-but-don’t-break aura. “Anyway, that’s enough talk about Chris. Our next stop is Dalenburg, and once we have our reward, we’re free mercenaries again. Captain, I hope you’re coming up with a plan for what we’ll do after.”

“Y-yeah… Right. I’d better get to thinking about what we’re doing next.”

The gateway had taken us far from our previous haunts, so we would have to gather info on nearby star systems. We also had quite a bit of money saved up, so looking into buying a mothership might be a good plan. That would let us earn money through shipping, and we could free up the *Krishna*'s cargo space to put more equipment and appliances in it.

I wanted to buy a mothership, but preferably for cheap and of good quality. Repairing one when it was shot down typically cost as much as buying a new one, so the cheaper the ship proper and the parts needed to customize it, the cheaper maintenance would be. And if I wanted a cheap ship, then going to where they were produced would be best. Basically, a star system with ship manufacturers.

Hmm. I'll be sure to keep all this in mind.

Chapter 9:
Where Are We off to Next?

IT SEEMED THAT our stay at the Kormat System—more specifically, Kormat Prime—would be a prolonged one. Why, you ask? That would be thanks to the suppression ship that tore through Count Dalenwald's flagship. Repairs were going to take a long time.

Unfortunately for us, the suppression ship tore pretty deeply into the ship, so its removal and repairs were predicted to take about ten days. I had to wonder why we didn't just do the most urgent repairs and then head straight to the Dexar System, but it apparently wasn't good for appearances to come home with a huge hole in your ship. Not that I minded, since…

"It looks like we're getting paid today," I remarked.

"Is it really right for us to accept 250,000 Ener a day for what we've done?" Mimi asked.

"I'm not gonna say no to a client!" Elma replied.

The Kormat System was replete with mineral resources, and it had two planets being terraformed. With their terraforming almost complete, they were beginning to expand Kormat Prime. As more merchants were drawn by potential mineral refinement and trade, the place was getting awfully lively.

Pirates naturally followed, so it was becoming a great place to work as a mercenary. But with the heavy wounds to Count Dalenwald's defensive unit, and with some of the Kormat System's army revolting alongside Balthazar, the system's forces were greatly weakened.

Given the possibility of a large band of pirates coming to attack the colony, the *Krishna* and its crew were ordered by Count Dalenwald to stay here, just in case.

"I appreciate how lively the colony is, but *damn*, there is nothing fun to do here," I complained.

"At least daily essentials are cheap," Elma added.

“There aren’t many places selling high-quality goods, huh? More quantity than quality here.”

Commerce which was centered around the natural resources being mined from terraformed colonies would become very lively here. With that, shops that prioritized quality over quantity would begin to pop up for the laborers who were helping to expand the colony.

“I guess we’re spending another day hanging out on the ship. I don’t mind just being lazy for a day or two, but today, I think I wanna talk about what we’ll do next.” I decided to finally broach the subject of our future plans. “Basically, I want to look into buying a mothership.”

“A mothership, huh? What’s the budget?”

“Right now, maybe twenty-five million Ener. I don’t know just how much Count Dalenwald will pay us, but I guess we could consider it expandable to thirty million.” At this rate, he might end up paying us five million Ener today. No doubt our mission completion rewards and helping in the fight against Balthazar would add on to that.

“Hmm, maybe if we have that much… Still might be rough, though.” Elma cocked her head, brow furrowed in thought. Thirty million Ener would cover a common mothership’s purchase and customization, sure, but it was a little iffy whether it would cover insurance in case it got shot down.

I continued, “I don’t have plans to use multiple battleships yet, so a hangar that only holds the *Krishna* is enough. I’m thinking about not giving it much firepower and instead emphasizing hefty shields, speed, and cargo space. If we make it too strong, pirates would start attacking us in hopes of taking over the ship, right?”

“Gotcha. So, you want one that’s closer to a *cargo* ship than a *battle*ship. I think we can do it, but we’ll be cutting it close.”

“Oh, but I do want to go to a manufacturer’s star system to make it as cheap as possible. The only question is which manufacturer we should buy from.” I tapped around on my tablet terminal to display a catalog on the cafeteria’s holo-display. “I’ve found a few potential candidates.”

The first one I showed off was the RIMS-013 Nighthawk from Rikon Industries. It was a medium-sized mothership with an emphasis on speed. Though its plating, shields, and cargo capacity left a little to be desired, it

was a top-class mothership. Its mobility was nice, too, and the lack of plating and shields was only in comparison to other motherships. Just being a little inferior still meant that it was far tougher than the revamped private ships that pirates used.

"I think it looks cool and fast, kind of like the *Krishna*." Mimi's feedback was valuable indeed.

"A sharp, streamlined ship," Elma nodded. "I do like one that can get away from trouble."

"Agreed," said Mei. "However, I believe it may not be suited for use with the *Krishna*. If you wish to make use of the *Krishna*'s offensive power, then perhaps emphasizing durability would be best?"

"I see. Then maybe this one will agree with you more."

The next ship to be displayed was Space Zwerg's own SDMS-020 Skithblathnir. It was slower than the Nighthawk, but it had lots of shield capacity and thick plating. It also had plenty of cargo space, making it great for commerce. The ship design had a lot of leeway, so depending on our customizations, it could work not just as a mothership/supply ship, but also as a mining ship or research vessel.

However, with the ship being so heavy, it wasn't very fast or mobile. That also meant it was weak to being interdicted, and even in FTL travel, it wasn't that fast—that was also true for hyperdrive.

"It's big and chunky!"

"I don't mind its capabilities, but I'm not a fan of its aesthetics."

"I believe this ship would be more effective at utilizing the *Krishna*'s offensive power," Mei chimed in. "It will have trouble with interdictors due to its relatively slow faster-than-light travel, but perhaps you would find attracting pirates to be more of a benefit."

"Yeah, true. I don't want it to be *too* slow, though."

I then showed off the third candidate: Ideal Starways' medium mothership, the ISMS-007 Chrome Elephant. It was somewhere in between the two ships I showed before it—slower than the Nighthawk, but with more cargo and protection; faster and more mobile than the Skithblathnir, but less shield capacity, thinner plating, and limited cargo room.

“It looks rather similar to the imperial fleet’s ships, doesn’t it?” Mimi asked.

“That’s because Ideal makes their ships,” Elma explained. “Just looking at their ships brings back bad memories for me.”

“I disagree with this compromise,” Mei said. “In this ship, we may be unable to escape enemies that the Nighthawk could evade, and unable to withstand attacks that the Skithblathnir could take.”

“Denied, huh? The specs aren’t bad, though…” I shrugged. Mimi didn’t seem to mind it, but this ship didn’t sit well with Elma at all. Mei also seemed against it, so we wouldn’t be picking the Chrome Elephant. “Let’s forget about that one, then. How about we talk about the Nighthawk versus the Skithblathnir?”

“Sure.”

“Of course.”

“I-I don’t mind either… I’ll let you all choose!” Mimi quickly abstained. To be fair, she didn’t know too much about ships yet. But at this point, it looked like Elma would vote Nighthawk and Mei would vote Skithblathnir, which meant I would have to be the tiebreaker. *How should we do this?*

“First,” I began, “let’s talk about why we’re buying a mothership.”

“Good idea!”

“Sounds good to me.”

Mimi and Elma readily agreed to my proposal. Mei nodded in silence.

“Ultimately, our goal can be summarized as ‘making more money.’ Let’s consider what our current bottleneck is right now. I’d say that’s our lack of expandability, including cargo space.”

“The *Krishna* does seem to be a small craft specialized toward fighting, after all,” Mei agreed, “so that is a difficult point to cover for.”

Since the *Krishna* was a small battleship made with fighting in mind, it was good at its intended purpose. However, it wasn’t built with expansion in mind. With a small cargo hold, we couldn’t store much loot, putting to

waste many of the things that we could otherwise get after killing tons of pirates.

"So that means the goal of buying this mothership would be procuring cargo space and expandability," I continued. "In that case, the best of the three ships would be Skithblathnir."

"Agreed."

Elma rolled her eyes. "Fair enough," she said.

"Good; I'm glad we agree so far. Now, if we only prioritize those, then the Skithblathnir is the obvious choice. Its rival, the Nighthawk, is inferior in expandability but superior in speed. Mobility is also a major factor, because escaping an ambush is always important."

"Yep, that's right."

"Is it?"

This was where Elma and Mei's views clashed.

Mei explained, "Speed would enable us to escape attacks without deploying the *Krishna*, but that means putting the *Krishna*'s offensive capabilities to waste. Yet if we deployed the *Krishna* and fought, a ship as large as a mothership would not be able to evade much with its meager mobility. In such a situation, the Nighthawk's weak shields and frail plating would also become the *Krishna*'s weakness. In other words, the only benefits of choosing it would be slightly faster cruising and faster-than-light travel." Her logic seemed almost flawless.

Next came Elma's rebuttal. "Your points are good, but what about the crew's safety? With the Skithblathnir's size and limited mobility, we'd be sitting ducks in front of laser fire, multi-cannons, large-bore artillery, and anti-ship torpedoes. Powerful shields and plating are great and all, but we'll still blow up if they hit us with enough firepower. The Nighthawk can't dodge everything, either, but at least it can get into FTL travel while the *Krishna* buys us some time."

"We plan to mainly fight pirates, so I believe it would be silly to expect large-bore artillery or anti-ship torpedoes," Mei replied. "They much prefer to seize medium and large craft, rather than destroy them. They would never use such overt methods of attack. Furthermore, the Nighthawk

is too small for a mothership, making it difficult to expand. I think it would be difficult for it to satisfy our basic goal of expandability." She punctuated this with a shake of her head before adding, "There may be times when we would prefer to pilot the Nighthawk over the *Krishna*, but if we plan to use both ships in tandem, then I am certain that the Skithblathnir would be more well-suited to our needs."

Finally, Mei turned to stare at me. I put a hand to my chin and thought for a moment. The way she explained it, the Skithblathnir seemed to synergize better with the *Krishna*. But was that true? If the Nighthawk excelled at anything, it was clearly mobility. High mobility meant low-stress piloting and speedy escape from danger zones.

"Elma will probably be the usual pilot of the mothership, and I figure the Nighthawk would be the easiest one for her to pilot," I said after some consideration.

"Yep, that's for sure."

"I think so, too."

Elma and Mimi both agreed with that. She originally piloted a fast, hard-to-control ship. It was pretty clear that instead of driving the dull Skithblathnir, she would feel more at home with the nimble Nighthawk.

"Will Miss Elma be controlling it?" Mei asked, surprised. "I was under the impression that *I* would pilot the mothership."

"Oh?"

"Huh?"

Elma and I were both surprised by that statement. *Huh? Why Mei? I never even thought of that.*

"Yes. Miss Elma is an indispensable co-pilot for the *Krishna*, and likewise Miss Mimi as its operator. With that in mind, I believe it would be best for me to pilot the mothership. Fortunately, I am able to deal with any potential invasion of the ship. As long as they aren't equipped with space suits or power armor, I can simply depressurize the inside of the ship and stop them at once."

"That's disgusting…" I said, imagining the gruesome sight.

Mei might've looked like a cool beauty with long, black hair, but she was actually a machine lifeform. As such, she could work just fine in outer space without any extra gear. If pirates came in ready to plunder, they would instead die and expel disgusting substances from every orifice. *Jeez, just imagine cleaning all* that *up.*

"I don't plan to let pirates attack us, but if they did, I could remove them without issue." With that, Mei put a hand to her chest and nodded sternly, as if showing some expressionless confidence. I looked to Elma, and then to Mimi. It seemed our decision was clear now.

"In that case, we'll have to go to a star system where Space Zwerg has a production facility. Mimi and Elma, do you mind?"

"Nope, I don't care."

"Sure!"

"Okay, then that's where we're going next. Cool with that, Mei?"

"Yes, Master," Mei agreed quietly. As it turned out, Space Zwerg had a manufacturing plant in the Vlad System, which wasn't too far from here. It was about four hyperlanes away from the Dexar System, where we would go after the count's defenses finished their repairs.

"The Vlad System seems to be very heavily influenced by Space Zwerg's business," Mimi informed us. "It and its child companies even manage the colonies."

"Huh, really? Sounds like fun. I'm always up for unique experiences."

"Yeah…'unique' sure is one way to put it." For some reason, Elma looked a little perturbed. Had she been to the Vlad System before? *Meh—might as well just be excited instead of bugging her about it. She's wary of danger, so she'll let us know if something is up. If she's not saying anything, then we have nothing to worry about.*

Heavily influenced by Space Zwerg's business, huh? Like a corporation's own autonomous region? I wondered how their governmental situation worked. *I can't wait to see all of that.*

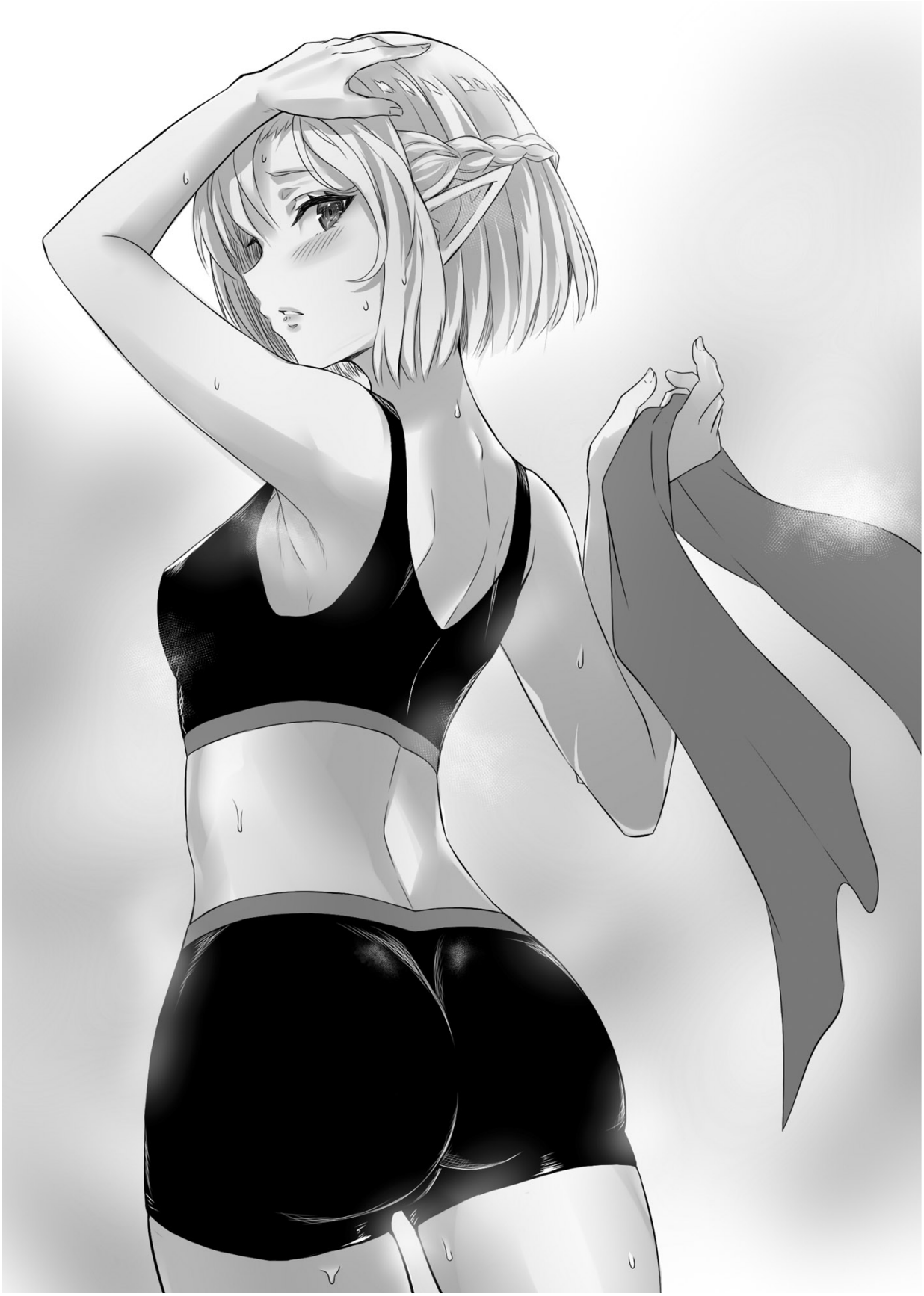
***

Our surplus of free time continued into our fifth day on Kormat Prime as we waited for Count Dalenwald's flagship repairs.

Standby orders were surprisingly stressful. Since we had to be ready to launch at any time, we couldn't leave the ship. In Elma's case, that meant a limit on how much she could drink. We'd been on prohibition during standby duty before, but we kinda disobeyed that since we had Mei. Yet despite that, it put a huge amount of stress on Elma. Every day, she looked a little more dead inside.

Mimi and I weren't as stressed as her. I was kind of a lightweight, so I didn't drink. Mimi was of age, but she didn't partake much. That said, I was stressed about not being able to go out into space freely. I messed with some simulations to distract myself, but I wanted to fly around real space. Mimi was probably the least bothered of us right now.

"I dunno if exercising more out of boredom is healthy or not," Elma muttered to herself, wiping the sweat from her brow. Combined with her form-fitting gym wear, she was looking awfully sexy.



“Hey, it’s healthier than getting used to boredom and living a life of depravity.”

“Perv.”

“*I’m* the perv? I seem to remember that you—Ow, *ow*!” My defiance was met with her pulling on my cheek. To be fair, we *did* live a life of depravity for the first three days.

Now that we had a team of four with Mei, our new rotation was two on standby and two resting. After restraining ourselves while Chris was here, being alone just kinda led to…well, *y’know*. But we knew we couldn’t do that forever, so we decided to live the healthy way.

“Excuse me.” Suddenly, Mimi’s voice came over the training room speaker.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Um, we’ve received a message from Count Dalenwald. It seems to be a summons…or maybe an invitation? He wants us all to go to his flagship.”

“Huh. I wonder what for? Well, what time? Now?”

“It says one hour from now. He also says that they will prepare lunch.”

“Lunch with nobles, eh? Sounds fun. You and Mei get ready to go out; Elma and I will rinse off.”

“Yes, Captain.” Mimi hung up, so I looked over to Elma.

“There you have it. Let’s go clean u—*hey*!!!” Elma threw a fresh towel right at my face. *What’s the big idea?*

“If I bathe with you, you’re gonna try and pull something. Hard pass.”

“Say *whaaat*?”

“Don’t ‘say whaaat’ me. Get serious. We’re about to go meet the count.” After totally avoiding eye contact, Elma left the training room ahead of me. She was right, to be honest. Gotta get serious.

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After making ourselves presentable, we headed to Count Dalenwald's flagship. Repair drones flew in and out of the hole in the ship's white hull, still hard at work on repairs.

All of the other ships had already finished repairs, so security was returning to the Kormat System. Count Dalenwald had prioritized repairing the system's army and his defensive unit over the flagship, allowing security to recover much faster.

"That means we won't be needed anymore," I mused.

"Probably not, given the system's security," Elma added.

Mimi chimed in, "I didn't think much of it when we were talking about the police and the nobles governing these systems back on Tarmein Prime, but now that we've actually met and interacted, they certainly seem to be careful rulers."

"Yeah, you never really get an eye for this stuff until you look at it from a mercenary's point of view. Merchants probably see it since they perform intersystem trade, but most people who make money in their home colonies wouldn't notice."

"Data indicates that more than eighty percent of colonists never leave their home colony," Mei informed us. "To them, space pirates and the forces who protect them are distant beings."

Wow, eighty percent? The other twenty must be those mercs and merchants I mentioned. Not many other people would go between star systems. But if you consider it as one out of every five people, that doesn't sound like a small number at all, does it?

We walked and talked until we arrived at the ladder to Count Dalenwald's flagship. As usual, burly macho men with full body armor and laser rifles blocked our way.

"Hi there," I greeted them. "We're here at the behest of the count."

"We've been waiting for you. May we take your weapons?"

“Of course,” I agreed, handing my laser gun and its holster over to the men. I also threw in the backup energy packs. Mimi and Elma followed suit, handing over their own weapons.

“They’re rather heavy. Do you mind?” Mei asked, giving them her black ball thing, security baton, and more. They were all made from highly compressed metal, so they were heavier than they looked. The men winced as they took them.

Seriously, where is Mei hiding all those weapons? We’re gonna need a detective on this case.

“We have waited for your arrival,” a maid greeted us when we were inside. “Please, follow me.” We seemed to be headed aft, to a higher deck of the flagship.

“It’s still a little early for lunch. I wonder what the count wants?” I asked out loud.

“He didn’t exactly spell it out in the summons…” Mimi added.

The maid didn’t seem to hear us, as the only thing she said to us was, “Please wait here.”

“All right.”

We had been brought to a large drawing room. The ship was huge, but this was one luxurious way of using space. The terrarium in the corner was chock full of plants, and the room itself was well lit, making for a refreshing setting.

“Yep, that’s high-class nobility for you,” I said. “Good taste. When we buy a mothership, we should set up a nice, relaxing space like this.”

“Sounds good to me,” Elma replied, “though I doubt we need a drawing room this formal. A casual couch, a table and chairs, and a big holo-display should go a long way.”

“A bigger cafeteria would be nice, too!” Mimi added, ever the gourmand.

“Yeah, the *Krishna*’s is kinda small.”

We had plenty of furnishings, but the *Krishna* was small, so it lacked living space. No matter how much stuff you had, there were always space

limitations. Count Dalenwald's ship made excellent use of its extravagant space, and it made an impression on us. We were planning to buy a large mothership, so it was totally possible to imitate this. I liked the terrarium, too: I definitely wanted one of those.

We looked around the room and chatted until the count and Chris entered. We all stood to greet them.

"Greetings. You may sit." Count Dalenwald was just as intimidating and blunt as ever. *Might as well just sit.*

We all took our seats almost simultaneously and received black tea—more like *red* tea—from the maids. Count Dalenwald then shot a glance at the maids, prompting them to leave. What could he want if he was sending his servants away? I felt a sudden, intense foreboding.

"You don't have to worry," he reassured us. "I'm not going to force anything on you."

"Really?"

"Christina has told me all about you. She says you prioritize freedom and hate being restrained. The Dalenwald family owes you a great deal, and we would never force you to do something you don't want to."

"I'm glad to hear that." I glanced to Chris, who returned a polite smile. *Oh, she's in refined-lady mode.*

"I'm rather ashamed of everything that has transpired," the count continued. "Balthazar was always an ambitious man, but never did I think he would go this far. I was clearly mistaken…or perhaps complacent. In either case, my carelessness resulted in the loss of my son and his wife. Without you and your crew, I would have lost Christina as well. Allow me to thank you again for that."

Count Dalenwald bowed his head, despite his expression remaining severe. It must be rare for a noble to bow his head to some crappy mercenaries. Maybe that was why he sent his servants away?

He lifted his head again. His face was still stern, but maybe he just had resting rich face. "You deserve an adequate reward for all you've done. I am more than able to employ you as a knight, but I imagine you would not welcome that."

“Yeah—er, I mean, yes, sir.”

“If you do not desire territory or titles, then our options are limited. It becomes a question of what’s realistic.” Count Dalenwald waved his hand, causing a holo-display to rise. It showed calculations regarding the time it would take for the flagship to be repaired, how long the trip to the Dexar System would be, and so on. “If things progress as they have, then I will have hired you for a total of twenty-two days. I also wish to add an additional reward to that. Your total will be eight million Ener.”

I expected our bodyguarding reward to be a bit over five million, but this went above and beyond that. That’s nobility for you, giving you an extra half on top of an already-high price.

“Thank you for that,” I eagerly replied. “We were planning on buying a mothership, so that’s a major help.”

“A mothership?” Chris cocked her head. She probably didn’t hear that word every day.

“Large ships that can dock and maintain smaller ships are called motherships,” I explained to her. “You can stock more materials on them, so you can go for longer voyages and fight for longer. And with all the cargo space, we can store tons of pirate loot. If we want to make more money, it’s a great first step. Oh… Sorry, I guess I shouldn’t talk to you so informally in front of Count Dalenwald.”

“Don’t be so mean. I’ll cry!”

“Please don’t…” I snuck a glance at the count. It was hard to tell whether he noticed or not, but he simply closed his eyes and crossed his arms.

“As long as you are discreet, I don’t plan to complain. I have my own friends that go beyond social standing, too. But…” He glared at me. *Oof, scary. This guy is way too intimidating.* “I cannot allow you to have the relationship that Chris wants. You seem to understand that well, so that is all that I should have to say on the subject.”

“Grandfather!” Chris objected.

“I will not budge on this matter. Nobles and commoners must know their places and stay in them.” Count Dalenwald’s position was clearly set

in stone here. Again, I had zero plans of trying to get involved with Chris, so I didn't mind this development. She looked extremely peeved, though. "That ends that conversation. Now, you mentioned purchasing a mothership. The nearby Vlad System should have a ship manufacturer there, as I recall."

"Right. That's exactly where we plan on going. We think they have just the ship for us."

"Then perhaps this will be of some help." Count Dalenwald reached into his pocket and pulled out what looked to be some kind of medallion. *Huh. What's that?* "This medallion is inscribed with the Dalenwald family crest. It is proof that we stand behind its bearer."

He held out the medallion. *Can I really just…take it? Like, just pull it out of his hand?*

"It won't do anything to bind you to our family, of course," he assured me. "It simply means that we vouch for you as a person worthy of trust."

"That sounds like a big deal…" I said. In other words, if I did anything dishonorable while I had this, it would affect the Dalenwald family by extension. Accepting it felt a little intimidating.

"Worry not. I'm not trying to force anything upon you, as I said before. You may not find many uses for it, but if anyone gives you trouble, they'll think twice if you show them that. Furthermore, Space Zwerg of the Vlad System imports many metal resources from our territory. Dwarves have a strong sense of duty. Present that medallion, and they'll treat you well."

With that, Count Dalenwald tossed the medallion in my direction. I frantically caught it on its way down. It was a lot bigger than a 500-yen coin, but it wasn't as heavy as I expected.

It was made of a shiny silver metal, but it didn't seem like any metal I had ever seen. Definitely not aluminum, at least. Maybe it was silver? I had never cared much for silver accessories, so I couldn't tell the difference. At any rate, it would be rude to give it back now.

"Heh," I chuckled. "Pushy."

“You can’t be a count without some measure of pushiness.” Count Dalenwald smirked—just slightly though. That was probably the best smile he could muster. “That’s all I have to say. I have some errands, but I would like you all to eat lunch with Christina.”

“Grandfather?” Chris looked up at him.

“I have negotiations with the imperial fleet. Both of us are in a frenzy thanks to my son.” Count Dalenwald heaved a sigh and stood up. I tried to stand too, but he gestured for me to stay. “I want you to spend time with Chris. She’s been rather bored these past five days, you see.”

The count said good-bye and began to walk, dignified as ever, out of the room. Suddenly, he stopped and looked to Mimi. “Incidentally,” he said, “have you and I met before?”

“W-Wha?! M-me?!” Mimi stammered. “N-no, I…don’t think so. Chris—sorry, Christina—was the first noble I’ve ever spoken with.”

“Hmm…I see. My apologies for the strange question.”

“I-it’s okay!” Mimi shrunk back and shook her head. As a lifelong imperial citizen and a commoner, she couldn’t handle a nobleman like Count Dalenwald. The poor girl was so shaken.

But what was the deal with all that? Was the count actually mistaken, or did she just look like someone else? *It’s not gonna turn out that Mimi is actually a noblewoman, right? Right?*

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“Damn, I didn’t think we’d make *this* much.”

“That’s a glimpse at the wallet of a noble with territory,” Elma said sagely.

“So…much…money…” Mimi’s eyes were spinning.

After lunch with Chris, we returned to the *Krishna* and gathered in the cafeteria to discuss the sum that Count Dalenwald had revealed to us.

It was honestly shocking. Bodyguard fees plus our bonus totaled out to eight million Ener in one go. That was eight hundred million yen! Not to

mention we had made eight million Ener already by bringing Chris to him safe and sound, so that meant Count Dalenwald had given us a total of sixteen million Ener for this whole crazy chain of events. What a big spender.

Anyway, Mimi's cut was 0.5%, meaning that she earned 40,000 Ener. Elma's 3% netted her 24,000 Ener. The remaining 7.72 million Ener made up my personal cut. My funds were about 24.4 million before, so now I would be at 32.1 million. Anything past that first decimal point got eaten up by ammunition, fuel, and docking costs, so I just truncated it for simplicity.

We had estimated the price of a mothership at thirty million Ener, but we could expect some discounts thanks to Count Dalenwald, so maybe we could splurge on its specs a little more.

"Urrgh…" Mimi groaned to herself, covered in sweat as she looked at her Ener balance. *Hm? 0.5% isn't that much. It just doesn't feel right for me to take 7.72 million while Mimi only gets 40,000… Okay, I got this.*

"By the way, Mimi. You've gotten pretty used to your operator work lately, right?"

"*Huh*?! Um…yes?" She jumped. My declaration must have taken her by surprise.

"Yep," Elma agreed. "She's finished her training, and she's off to a good start." It was unclear whether she knew what I was getting at or not.

"I'd say it's about time we looked into increasing Mimi's cut."

"Ah? N-no, thank you! I'm fine!" Mimi waved her hands frantically, still holding her tablet. Why was she so against getting a raise?

"Don't be like that. When you get more responsibilities, you should get higher pay to match. You're already successfully taking care of docking permission, refueling and refilling ammunition, *and* selling off loot. You even know how to handle communications and watch the radar. Don't you deserve to be paid what you're worth?"

"He's right. Half a percent is as low as it goes. Why not make it a full one percent?"

"Yeah. That means you'll get 80,000 instead of—"

"I-I'm fine! Next time! We can do it next time!"

“C’mon,” I urged. “We made a ton of money, so let’s do it right this time.” I was confused by Mimi’s strange refusal. I could see resisting a pay *decrease*, but a pay *increase*? That’s just bizarre.

“I could never use that much money!” Mimi screamed.

Elma and I looked at each other.

“You can’t even customize a zabuton for 80,000 Ener,” I said.

“Yup,” she agreed. “That won’t buy you even the crappiest generator.”

The zabuton was the ship which every *Stella Online* player started with. It was rectangular and flat, so people liked to call it the zabuton, after the real-life cushion. That was SOL slang, but for some reason, Elma understood it. It was moments like this when I had to wonder if this was a different universe or not.

“Please don’t talk to me with your views about money,” Mimi complained. “I’m a common person. 40,000 Ener is enough to live in luxury for an entire year.”

“Is it? I guess that does sound about right.”

Multiplying that by a hundred to convert to Japanese yen would put her at four million yen. Ignore taxes and insurance, and that would be enough to live a whole year with some leeway. Water, air, and housing were expensive in this universe, but food was extremely cheap.

“But anyway, things are different out here,” I told her. “If you’re that serious, then we’ll leave it at half a percent this time and bump you up to a full percent next time and from there onward. That’s my decision.”

“*Gulp*…okay.” Mimi sighed and muttered some complaint under her breath.

It wasn’t like she had to use money immediately. She could just save it up. If Mimi ever had to leave this ship for any reason, her savings would naturally be a huge help.

Aww. Imagining a life without Mimi just makes me feel sad. Okay, calm down. Breathe in…breathe out.

“What are you doing? It’s creeping me out…” Elma said, but I honestly thought she was sweet for worrying about me.

“Nah, I’m fine. Don’t worry about it; just had some bad thoughts. By the way, what should we do about Mei’s reward?”

Mei cocked her head at my question. “My reward?”

“Yeah. You’re working as a crew member here. Cleaning and other odd jobs, assisting us, teaching sometimes, even being a bodyguard. You do plenty of work, don’t you?”

“I see. But that will not be necessary. The Steel Chef 5 handles the ship’s meals single-handedly, yet you wouldn’t pay it a reward. I am the same. It is my duty as a Maidroid to carry out any orders that you give me.”

“But you need clothes and stuff, right?”

“I have my maid outfit and some backups, so that won’t be necessary. If I require anything for work, then I will ask you.”

Was that how it worked? I looked over to the girls, but Mimi cocked her head and Elma nodded to me. *I guess that’s how it works. Huh.*

“Okay,” I gave in. “But seriously. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Yes. Thank you for asking.” Mei bowed and righted herself again, looking awfully happy. Maybe I was going crazy, but I think she liked my concern.

Things sure were different in this universe.

Epilogue

AFTER COUNT DALENWALD'S flagship finished its repairs in the Kormat System, we made it to the neighboring Dexar System without any major problems. I expected as much; the usurper Balthazar had already been captured, and the count had dealt with Balthazar's co-conspirators himself.

I don't know how they forced Balthazar to spill the beans, but in a universe this advanced, no doubt there were ways to make people talk. I wouldn't be surprised to learn about truth serums or ways to extract info directly from the brain.

"We decided to head to the Vlad System. We'll be starting the trip there tomorrow," I said to the person on the other end of the holo-display in my bedroom.

"I see… You don't want to take things a little slower, then?" Chris frowned slightly in disappointment.

"Well, we don't wanna stay too long. The Dexar System is under the careful protection of the count, so there isn't much work for us mercenaries."

"Oh…" Chris looked down sadly. I wanted to just leave without saying goodbye, but I had ended up calling her because it felt too irresponsible to do otherwise.

"So, er, yeah. I guess that's farewe—"

"I'll see you again," she interrupted before I could finish. I looked back to the screen, where Chris was smiling. She looked just a little more mature than usual. "I mean that. Make sure you come back to see me, okay? Once a month would be nice."

"Uh… Once a month probably won't happen. How about twice a year?"

"If that's how it must be, then twice a year will work. I'll be waiting for you, my dear knight."

“Um, our contract is up, so you don’t have to—”

“I haven’t released you from your duty yet. You’re still *my* knight, even now.” Chris gave me a big smile. She seemed more forceful than usual, a trait I hadn’t noticed in her before now.

“Ha ha… Someone’s gotten a little pushy, huh?”

“I am heiress to Count Dalenwald, after all. I cannot continue to be a weak little princess.” Chris puffed out her chest as she answered, as if proud of her status. *True. Can’t be a weak little princess forever.* “Let’s meet again, Hiro. I’ll be waiting.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“If you don’t come, then I’ll come and capture you. Even if it takes all my authority as countess.”

“Now that’s scary. I’ll try to come and see you. *Promise.*” After our journey together, the dozing princess of the cold sleep pod had become just a little tougher. Mei’s teachings must have worked a bit too well. “See ya.”

“Okay.”

We exchanged smiles and hung up. No regrets now.

***

“Okay, time for launch!” I announced as I took the main pilot’s seat in the cockpit. “Everyone, make your checks.”

“Systems all green. Ammunition’s good, fuel’s good. We can launch whenever!” Elma worked her console in the co-pilot’s seat next to me, checking each of her items.

The *Krishna*’s self-diagnosis systems showed all systems green, but I was thinking it might be best to get the ship an overall tune-up soon. The only issue there was that no other ship like it existed anywhere. The parts might end up being special ordered, but as long as we could find the manufacturer, they could probably remake them for us.

“Our food, water, and medical goods are topped up, as well!” Mei informed us after double-checking our cargo. Replenishing and managing

the ship's storage was her job now. I had originally left it to Mimi, but Mei was strangely insistent that it was a maid's job.

"All right. Mimi, make a departure request."

"Aye aye!" Mimi worked her own console to send a departure request to Dexar Prime's Port Authority.

Before long, we were given permission. I released docking to the hangar and slowly flew the *Krishna* out.

"The excitement of a launch never goes away, no matter how many times I do it."

"Agreed. I'm excited, too!"

"I get that."

We talked as we proceeded through the port and leapt out into the endless expanse of space.

"Okay. Mimi, prepare navigation."

"Aye aye. Preparing navigation!" Mimi used her operator console to lock onto the target star system on our HUD. I turned the ship in that direction and accelerated.

"Begin charging the FTL drive."

"Understood. Charging faster-than-light drive. Beginning countdown." Following my orders, Elma began the charge. "Five…four… three…two…one… Activating FTL drive."

Then came its trademark *boom* as the *Krishna* began to move faster than light. Stars in the distance began to draw lines behind them. It was a strange sight, no matter how many times I saw it.

"Successfully connected to hyperlane," Elma continued. "Hyperdrive charging. Counting down: Five, four, three, two, one. Hyperdrive activated!" Space warped, and light distorted. In the next instant, an endless rainbow filled our field of vision as the *Krishna* plunged into hyperspace.

"Okay. Let's hope the next assignment ends peacefully."

"I certainly hope so…" Mimi shuddered alongside me.

"Not gonna happen," Elma groaned.

“Don’t just give up like *that*!” I retorted at the already-resigned elf as the *Krishna* soared through the strange, multicolored space.

Our next destination was the Vlad System, a manufacturing system where Space Zwerg’s factory awaited us.

***

And they were gone.

There was a *boom* as Hiro and his black battleship turned into a disappearing arrow of light. He was off to a place I could never reach him, but I had no choice in the matter. He was a bird, born to spread his wings throughout the great expanse of space.

If I were to force such a free bird into a cage, what would happen? I can only imagine he would stop being who he was. If I wished to be with him, then there was one—no, perhaps there were two ways.

The first would be to become a bird myself, to call all of space my home like he does. The second would be to make a place where that bird could rest his wings.

I couldn’t fly with him. The burden on my wings was simply too heavy for me to soar alongside him. Perhaps I could if I cast off the burden of duty… but I couldn’t. It was left to me by my own late mother and father, after all.

“Have they departed?” My grandfather was standing behind me. His eyes were drawn to the holo-display where the man had been onscreen moments ago. His expression was stern. “Christina, I think you know this, but…”

“I do, Grandfather.” Either way, I was a powerless little girl.
So powerless that I couldn’t even *make* the cage needed to trap that man. How could someone like me make a home for such a free bird to rest his wings? “An heiress to the Count Dalenwald name cannot be powerless forever.”

“That’s the spirit. Let us remain hard at work.”

“Yes, Grandfather.” I was powerless now, but what about a year from now? Two years from now? Or perhaps even three, when I reached adulthood? That would likely mark a true turning point. I had to gain the power to be recognized not as a powerless little girl, but the capable Countess Dalenwald.

My grandfather would help me, too. I had the backing of all of Count Dalenwald’s authority. Nothing would be impossible. To borrow Mei’s words, “There’s nothing stronger than a maiden in love.”

EX:
The *Krishna* Becomes a Passenger Ship

HALF AN HOUR after leaving the Dexar System, we were in the middle of a hyperlane on our way to the neighboring Iomett System. No matter how many times I see them, I'll never get used to all these psychedelic sights. It's especially interesting how each hyperlane had slightly different color patterns.

"You really didn't give it a thought, did you, Hiro?" Elma asked. "You don't think you're missing out at all?"

"That's an abstract question, though I get what you mean." She must have been referring to either the knight work that Count Dalenwald mentioned, or a relationship with Chris. "I guess it would be a shortcut to glory and all, but…" I glanced at Elma in the co-pilot seat next to me, and Mimi in the operator seat beyond her.

"It's not worth losing my life with you girls," I declared. Chris was cute and all, but she wasn't where I belonged. Maybe that would change in five years or so—I dunno. At least she'd certainly turn out pretty.

"Hiro… Sometimes you're so direct that it's embarrassing." Elma turned away shyly, but I could see that her long ears were twitching and red. *Ha, she's trying to hide them with her hands!*

"I wonder what kind of life you would have if you became Count Dalenwald's knight?" Mimi said.

"I dunno. My strength lies in the *Krishna*, so it probably wouldn't be all that different from what it is now. I doubt the count or Chris would try to pull me out of this ship."

The *Krishna* had a lot of tech that the Grakkan Empire didn't have access to, so if anyone wanted to take it from me, it would probably be the empire itself for research purposes. If that time ever came, then all apologies to Count Dalenwald, but I would absolutely defy the empire and fight to the death to protect my ship. I would *not* be a government official.

"Meh…" I shrugged. "Let's just say it wasn't in the stars. I like my life as it is now. Though maybe I should've asked you girls about it first."

Thinking back, I kind of refused becoming his knight without consulting them. If the girls had wanted to live a secure, successful life under the count, then I might've messed that up for them.

"I like the mercenary life, too," Mimi declared. "It's a shame we had to leave Chris behind, though."

"I wouldn't want to serve nobility," Elma added. "Besides, we owe you."

"I get Mimi, but Elma? You haven't even paid me…never mind. I'm not complaining."

"Oh? You're not? Anyway, my plan is to pay it all back in one lump sum. Just you wait, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'll wait as long as you need." *Quit smirking at me like that, Elma! I'm not short on money, anyway, so you don't have to rush to pay me back. But if you wanna get uppity with me, maybe I'll retaliate.* "I'll have you pay back the interest in bed tonight. Be ready."

"What?!" Elma gasped, her jaw wide open from shock. She deserved that for teasing me.

I won't be merciful later, either.

***

The *Krishna* reached the Iomett System without issue, while I enjoyed my degenerate lifestyle all the way there. Elma and Mimi were recovering in my room, so only Mei and I were in the cockpit.

Yeah, Mimi too. I did *say "degenerate", after all.*

"So, the Iomett System," I began. "Do you think we'll find anything interesting here?"

"It is an average system with nothing major occurring," Mei responded. "The materials produced there are nothing of note, as well. However, Iomett II is the home planet of Ferrexes."

"Ferrexes?"

“They are therianthropes between forty and sixty centimeters in height,” Mei said, using the console to show a picture of a Ferrex on the holo-display. It looked like a weasel standing on two legs. Or maybe they were ferrets, given their name?

“Hmm…does that mean their trading colony has a lot of Ferrexes?”

“Compared to other colonies, yes. Their species prefers to stay near home, so it is rare for them to travel far from their home system. As such, many Ferrexes live in the colony in order to trade with other species.”

“Interesting. By the way, we’re still in the Grakkan Empire, right? How are Ferrexes treated by the empire?”

“The same as other citizens. The Iomett System was incorporated into the Grakkan Empire approximately 220 years ago. The Ferrexes do not like war, so there was no conflict when they were incorporated.”

“Hmm… Okay, then. How about we stop by their trading colony? An indigenous species like them ought to have a distinctive culture.” It was likely they had their own tech products or foods.

I was also interested in the empire’s expansion policy and governance. Humans were the majority species, but it seemed like Ferrexes and other not-quite-human-but-similar species were treated as equal citizens. I saw it as a reasonably diverse empire, but how hard was it to govern everything? Maybe the peerage system helped with that? It was interesting.

“Very well,” Mei assented. “I will set up navigation to the trading colony Iomett Prime.”

“Yes, please. Begin charging the FTL drive.”

“Understood. Charging now.”

Once we arrived at the colony, I would wake Mimi and Elma up to disembark. It sure would be nice to find something fun to do.

***

“Wow,” I gasped. “It’s bigger than I thought.”

“It is definitely big,” Mimi responded. “They must be flourishing.”

Apparently, the boom of FTL travel woke up Mimi and Elma before I could. It really was loud, to be fair.

“So, this is Iomett Prime,” Elma mused. “I’ve never been here before.”

“Wow, really? Have you seen Ferrexes before?”

“I don’t actually think so.”

“They must be shut-ins, I suppose,” I mused.

Among the species ruled by the empire, it was extremely rare for one to have the technology for interstellar travel but choose to stay at home instead. They probably had an equally rare and unique culture. I grew more and more excited to see the Ferrexes.

“Our docking request has been accepted,” Mei said. “We’ve been assigned hangar seventy-two.”

“Gotcha.” I followed the colony’s guide beam to the seventy-second hangar.

Iomett Prime was the biggest colony I had seen yet. Its shape was also different from all the others so far. The colonies I knew of were all like bicycle tires, cylinders, or spheres, but Iomett Prime was like a floating castle in outer space. The surface platform bristled with various structures.

The base of the colony, a flat platform, was connected to several circular modules. Whenever they wanted to expand, they probably built more modules to connect. Each module seemed able to support a structure on the top and bottom, making it highly expandable.

“Considering the size of the colony, their port isn’t very big.”

“I noticed that, too,” Mimi replied. “I don’t see a lot of commerce ships, but it’s not a small amount, either. Most seem to be passenger ships.”

“Maybe sightseeing is their main attraction?” Elma said, pondering their income.

The colony definitely felt strange. Their port was too small, and they had more passenger ships than merchants. Just in case, I decided I would

activate the *Krishna*'s shields once we left. Even if I didn't think it would be dangerous, one could never be too careful.

I activated the auto-docking computer, and the *Krishna* automatically docked to the hangar. Easy as pie, even if Elma looked mad about it every time.

"Let's disembark right away," I decided.

"Sure."

"Okay!"

"Then I shall guard—" Mei began, but I stopped her.

"Nah, Mei. Come with us. I'll just activate the shields."

"Understood. Then I shall join you." We probably wouldn't run into any danger, but I would feel safer if we had Mei with us. By now, I'd learned that the combination of unknown aliens, a suspicious colony, and our group always ended up in some crazy mess. I'd rather be careful almost to the point of cowardice than run into trouble.

After disembarking and exiting the port district, we arrived at an incomprehensible structure. "What's that?" I asked.

"I wonder…" Mimi was likewise confused.

I couldn't figure out how to use the structure, but plenty of people were gathered there. *Why do I feel like I've seen this before?* I raised an eyebrow as we all headed over to it.

The building had no clear doors; it was made so you could just walk right in. And it wasn't too big, either. The walls were covered in holo-displays, each one showing a different image or advertisement.

"Maybe this tells you where to find their brothels," I said with a chuckle.

"Hey!" Elma glared at me.

"What's a brothel?" Mimi remained confused.

Mei expressionlessly read the information on the holo-displays. "It seems to be an information bureau with information regarding restaurants and cafés where the Ferrexes attend to guests."

“Attend to…?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, attend to. It does not seem to have sexual connotations.”

According to Mei, it was a guide to stores where guests could play, eat, and cuddle with Ferrex employees. Ferrex fur was apparently very pleasant to touch, so much so that once a person experienced cuddling with Ferrexes, they would become so addicted that they’d constantly come back for more.

“Is it like some kind of narcotic?” I wondered.

“It seems that there have been past kidnappings and other such incidents perpetrated by those who saw value in them and their pelts. They have strict security now, however, so such events have become infrequent.”

“They’re so good that you always come back for more, huh?” That was a little intimidating, so I decided to just ignore it as I glanced at Mimi and Elma.

“Elma, this Ferrex Café seems nice,” Mimi said.

“The inside is nice and fancy,” Elma agreed, “but the menu looks a little too light for Hiro here.”

“We could just ask for more, then. Their food has good reviews.”

The two of them were raring to go. Mei kept her eyes fixed on the guide, so maybe she was interested, too. Mimi aside, I was surprised that the other girls were so into it.

“So, you want to go?” I asked them.

“Huh? Were we not planning to?” Elma raised an eyebrow.

“Why not?”

“I mean, aren’t you scared of some magical sensation so good that people literally *kidnap* them for it?” I asked.

“No. It makes me want to experience it!!!” Mimi exclaimed, eyes shining with excitement.

“You overthink things *waaay* too much for no reason.” Elma laughed me off, but this was too suspicious for me, even if the situation was beyond my control now. I surveyed Mei’s expression, but I couldn’t read her. Curse

her low emotionality. *I guess she'll be fine no matter what, but Mimi and Elma…*

"Okay," I surrendered. "Just be aware that I was against it."

Twenty minutes later…

"Ahhh…so *fluffy*…"

"I wanna pet them forever…"

I watched in horror as Mimi nuzzled her face against a white Ferrex, the most blissful smile on her face. Meanwhile, Elma petted a brown one in utter ecstasy. Even Mei wordlessly fluffed the fur of a grey one. *Damn it. It's too late for them now.*

"Sir? You don't seem very impressed by my fabulous fur."

"Oh, no. It's very pleasant." I scratched the chin of the Ferrex sitting in my lap and looking up at me, causing them to close their eyes happily.

The Ferrexes really were soft, fluffy, and pleasant all around. I've never touched an animal—sorry if it's rude to call them that—this pleasant before. But I did raise a dog in my old universe, and I had petted the cats of friends and relatives. I even got to pet little guys like chinchillas on rare occasions.

Chinchillas were wonderful to the touch, but Ferrexes were even *better*. To someone like me who had already felt plenty of animals' soft fur, though, it wasn't as impactful as it was to Mimi and the others. That was the only problem.

"I could see getting way into it if you've never felt something like it before," I thought aloud. "You're definitely the softest I've felt so far."

I would bet that Elma and Mimi had never touched something with fur like this before. I never saw any stray cats or dogs on other colonies, nor had I seen any pet shops. Actually, I'd never seen *any* animal other than sentient life. Most people probably never felt anything like a cat or dog.

What would happen if someone like that enjoyed a Ferrex's pelt just once? It would vary from person to person, but no doubt some would get

addicted. Even I had never felt a creature this soft. Without my built-in resistance, I might've gotten addicted myself.

"Goodness! Focused *and* skilled!" The Ferrex in my lap was in ecstasy at my chin-scratching, looking up at me in utter shock. I don't know why they were so astonished by my skill or whatever, but damn, these Ferrexes had life figured out. They put their special features as a species front and center to make a living.

It was kind of like a maid café—no, like a *cat* café. Were the Ferrexes all females? I couldn't quite tell. Incidentally, the Ferrexes handled waitering, too. They lifted trays above their little heads, balancing food and drinks on them. It was cute to see them tottering around. But if they were cats instead of ferrets, that act could've been a lot more dangerous.

"Incidentally, sir, would you like an extension?" The Ferrex in my lap asked, looking over to Mimi and the others as they continued to cuddle the employees.

"Oh, uhh… Sure, let's do thirty more minutes for now." Each extension was only about fifty Ener per person, meaning I paid two hundred Ener for our extensions. *You say that includes food and drinks? Well, be my guest.*

***

On the way home, Mimi started saying disconcerting things. "Aaah… Can't we bring a Ferrex home with us?"

"Uh, well…I doubt it." Elma had to chuckle as she warned her. She convinced Mimi otherwise, but she did seem to be into it for a second there. *You can't fool my eyes!* Mei remained silent, apparently deep in thought.

"What's up, Mei?" I asked. "Thinking about something?"

"I am analyzing the Ferrex touch data that I harvested."

"What's the point of that?"

"It is another thing worth researching as something that gives people pleasure and joy."

“Oh, I see.” Would Oriental Industries use this information to start making Maidroids with Ferrex-like ears, or something?

I pondered the question as we arrived at the *Krishna*. I brought down the shields as I watched the starry-eyed girls. It seemed we would be here for a few days to come.

“Huh?” Elma suddenly turned serious, her eyes darting around.

“What’s wrong?”

“…I felt like someone was just watching us. Did I just imagine that?”

“Oh…?” I looked around, but nobody seemed to be watching us specifically. Mei searched as well, but she likewise shook her head. It seemed she found nothing.

“Maybe your senses are dulled after you fell madly in love with those Ferrexes?” she suggested.

“I-I didn’t fall madly in love with them…”

Suuuuure you didn’t, I thought*. I bet you couldn’t say that to my face.*

“Let’s look around the place some more tomorrow!” Mimi’s eyes shone with excitement all over again.

“S-sure…” I said, but I just wasn’t that interested in the Ferrexes.

The next day, Mimi and Elma excitedly went off in search of more Ferrex cuddles. I wasn’t as charmed by them, so I decided to pass on it.

“You could’ve gone if you wanted, Mei.”

“I have finished collecting the bulk of their data,” she responded.

“Oh. Well, how about we go out on a date? Not that I have an itinerary in mind.”

“A date? That sounds lovely.” Mei didn’t look too excited, but that was just because of her default face. It did kinda feel from her tone that she was happy, though, so I decided to go with that. “Where should we go?” she asked.

“I dunno. For this colony’s size, the port and trade districts aren’t that big. I was wondering what’s going on in the other districts.”

“A fair plan. The guide map does seem to lack data on them,” Mei said.

She must have been using the colony’s public network to look for information. Though we were heading for districts that weren’t in the guide map, they didn’t seem to forbid entry. If nothing else, it wouldn’t be a crime just to go there.

“Just in case, can you check that we’re not doing anything illegal?” I requested.

“I’ve just checked, and it does not seem to go against any laws,” she said after a moment.

“Good stuff, Mei. You work fast.”

“Thank you for your praise.”

She truly was capable. Almost terrifyingly so, in fact, but it was up to me to use her to her fullest potential. I would have to grow as a leader if I didn’t want her capabilities to go to waste due to my shoddy leadership.

“This road is long as heck, though.”

“It is a connecting road between modules, after all,” Mei explained. “Though they may not look large from the ship, they are quite impressive structures.”

Strangely, this colony didn’t have any high-speed travel methods between modules. Most colonies used moving walkways, transport carts, or even capsule trains that moved through their mass transport system.

“Without high-speed travel, this must be inconvenient for the residents,” I mused. “Speaking of, I haven’t seen any at all.”

“Something is in the wall. Perhaps a goods transport system?”

“Huh. Do they use that to travel?”

“Most likely. Ferrexes are small, after all.” Ferrexes ranged from thirty to fifty centimeters in height, so they were small enough to sit right inside their transport system.

After a bit more walking, Mei grabbed my jacket and stopped in place. “Master, there is a personnel sensor installed,” Mei warned me. “In five meters, we will be in detection range. Would you like me to nullify it?”

“Nah, let’s leave it. If we nullify it, they might think we’re here to cause trouble. Besides, we’re not doing anything wrong, so let’s not hide ourselves.”

“Understood.”

Mei would let me know if there was a lethal trap here, so there probably was no threat. I doubted they would just kill passersby for no reason, anyway.

After passing through the sensor, I saw something approaching us. *Battle robots?* They looked to be robots modeled after a four-legged mammal, and there were two of them. They were white all over, looking like mechanical foxes from afar.

“What are those?” I asked.

“They are a type of machine that I am unfamiliar with,” she explained. “They are not large, but they seem to be agile.”

Either way, they were coming at us, so we decided to stop and wait for the mammal robots to approach. *Though they’re machines, their movements look natural as hell.*

“They look like they have weapons,” I said warily.

“Yes. I believe they’re similar to laser guns.”

The road was a straight line, so we didn’t have any cover. If it turned into a shootout, then I was at a major disadvantage without my power armor. Machines were sure to be sturdier than a flesh bag like me, though Mei might be able to take them on.

One of the two machines stepped forward. A voice that didn’t seem to be its own came out of it. “Hello, visitors. The Ferrex residential district lies ahead. Nothing there is likely to be of interest of you. What brings you here?”

I was a little wary, but it didn’t seem to mean us harm. “Oh, so it’s a residential district?” I replied. “Sorry, it’s nothing in particular. We just kind of wandered around and came this way to see what was here, since it wasn’t on the guide map. Just curiosity is all.”

“Curiosity, you say… Could you present identification?” The other robot asked. This seemed a little perfunctory, or business-like.

“I don’t have a guilty conscience, so I don’t care. But I have to ask. Who are you, and under what authority do you want my ID?”

My matter-of-fact question caused the two robots to look at each other. After a few seconds, their white metallic bodies suddenly and swiftly changed colors. They turned bright red, manifested red plus-marks on their bodies, and finally settled on a two-tone black-and-white scheme. They almost looked like police cars now.

“How rude of us. We are the security of Iomett Prime’s Ferrex Residential District. We request your identification under our authority, as security.”

“We don’t use these robots often, so we forgot to set them to their security colors. Sorry!”

The two mammal robots’ ears drooped down. *What elaborate machines.*

***

“Was it cramped?” one Ferrex asked. “Nobody comes this way except for us, so the transport pods are based on our size.”

“Meh, it’s fine,” I shrugged. “No big deal.”

“Yes. It was no problem.”

Ten minutes later, we were in the Ferrexes’ residential district. We had come here using their biggest transport pod, which was made to fit multiple Ferrexes at once. Unfortunately, it was still only big enough for one of us to ride at a time, so it was pretty cramped.

“This is incredible, though,” I said.

“Yes,” Mei agreed. “It is quite the large tree!”

In the Ferrexes’ residential district was a ridiculously, insanely *huge* tree. I don’t think there were trees this big on Earth! I recognized it as a tree because I could see branches with leaves here and there, but without them, I’d have no idea what it was. How tall *was* this thing?

“That’s our home. We’ve dug hollows into the Great Tree Drasell to live in,” one Ferrex explained, wearing a small bag on their back and carrying a super-tiny rifle as they looked up at the giant tree next to us.

The bag they wore was a backpack that carried energy packs, much like the ones for my laser gun. A cable was connected from the bag to their rifle, too. It must have been a special gun just for Ferrexes.

“Sorry we’re holding so many weapons. Rules are rules.” Another Ferrex was equipped the same way. They were the security staff inside the machines that had greeted us. Apparently, those foxlike contraptions were like specialized tanks for the Ferrex species.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” I said. “We understand if you don’t trust us.”

Ferrexes were small creatures—no doubt they would be on guard when approached by people more than three times their size. They might be faster than us, but there was an insurmountable difference when it came to body weight and sturdiness.

If Mei or I so much as punched them hard, they could sustain heavy injuries. Stepping on them or squeezing them hard would outright kill them. How could something like that not be wary of us? It would be like us fighting six- to seven-meter-tall giants.

“Do you have any shops for daily essentials at all?” I asked.

“All facilities that we need to survive are within the tree,” a Ferrex explained. “Not just living spaces, but also food production and commercial facilities. Unfortunately, it’s not big enough for you to enter.”

“Figures… I guess you were right in saying that it wouldn’t be interesting to us.”

“I guess so,” they shrugged.

There were a few holes about half a meter in diameter near the base of the tree, but it would definitely be too hard for me or Mei to fit in there.

“Still, just seeing a tree this huge made it worth coming,” I added.

“Is that so?”

“It would’ve been cool if there was a hole big enough in this tree for people to go in and experience a sort of imitation Ferrex lifestyle, though.”

“I see. I will pass that along as a visitor’s thoughts.” One of the two security staff members took his job very seriously. The other seemed… lazier? Maybe “carefree” was a more diplomatic way of saying it.

“Anyway, we don’t want to intrude,” I decided. “We’ll be on our way now.” The sight of Ferrexes poking their little heads out of holes here and there was adorable, but I didn’t want to disturb their peace.

Just then, the terminal in my pocket vibrated. “Hm?” I must have gotten a message.

“Is it from Elma?” Mei asked.

“Looks like it. She says we have a visitor…?”

Say what? Who would want to visit us?

***

When we returned to the ship, we found Mimi, Elma, and said visitor waiting for us.

“*This* is the visitor?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Elma answered. “But, er…”

She and I looked at the Ferrex. They wore a ragged trench coat and a worn-out fedora to match. They had a strange strength in their sharp eyes. Floating next to them was a suitcase even bigger than them. That thing must have been a container made with similar technology as our gravity spheres.

“This is the first time we’ve met, right?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” they responded. “I’m Keats, a humble courier.” Apparently male, the Ferrex named Keats extended his hand, so I squatted down to his height and shook his hand with my pointer finger and thumb. No matter how strange it is, you gotta respond to a proper greeting: that’s just called having good manners.

“I’m Hiro, captain and owner of the *Krishna*,” I introduced myself. “I’m the superior of Mimi and Elma, the girls who brought you here. And this is our Maidroid, Mei.”

“A pleasure to meet you.” Mei struck a lovely curtsy to greet Keats.

“So, Keats the Courier. What brings you here?”

“I want you to take me and my luggage here to the colony Mirei Secundus, in the Mirei System.” Keats punctuated that by smacking the suitcase next to him.

I pointed to the ship behind me with my thumb and asked, “Does this look like a passenger ship to you?”

“Nah. But really, you won’t even notice we’re here.”

Still squatting, I stared Keats in the eye for a while. *Hmm. He looks so much like a weasel that I can’t read his expression.* I was unfortunately not equipped with the ability to read minds or tell if people were lying based on the look on their faces, so I decided to outsource the problem.

“Send your request through the mercenary guild,” I said. Why had he come to me about this, anyway? He could just ask a normal passenger ship or merchant to take him to the next system over. It was too suspicious that he was coming directly to me, a mercenary.

“Well, that’d be a good waste of me coming all the way here to ask you directly!” He laughed. “I’m not asking for front-row seats here! Just toss me into the corner of your cargo space, okay?”

“Are you carrying illegal goods?”

“Nothing illegal here. It’s totally legal, if a little scandalous.”

“Scandalous?”

“Just a little! Anyway, we stand out too much talking out here. Let’s chat inside.” Keats glanced at the *Krishna*. I ignored him and looked to Elma and Mimi.

“Our bad.”

“We’re sorry…”

The two looked down sadly and apologized. This time, they had brought the trouble to me.

“As long as you know it was wrong,” I said, forgiving them. “Be careful from now on, okay?” I used my terminal to take down the *Krishna*’s shields. We would decide whether to accept Keats’ request after he told us everything.

“Ugh,” Keats groaned. “You Tallmen all make such huge, inconvenient stuff.” He clambered up one of the cafeteria’s stools and stood atop it, with only his head and shoulders visible over the table.

“Wow…” Mimi put her hands to her mouth and squealed in delight at the sight.

“Cute…!” Elma agreed, her lips twitching. They called him cute, but Keats sounded like a grizzled old man.

These two were definitely taken in by his cuteness, right? That's gotta be why they agreed to let him talk to me. I'll have a word with them about that later.

"Tallmen," though? Really? I would imagine that most races alien to the Ferrexes would be Tallmen.

"So?" I demanded. "You said it's not illegal, so… what's in the suitcase?"

"I can't tell you that much, but I swear on the emperor's own name that it's *totally* legal."

"Swear on the emperor's name…?" As someone who wasn't an imperial citizen, I had no idea how much resolve or trustworthiness was behind that statement.

Noticing my confusion, Elma cleared her throat and took the lead. "If you're willing to swear on the emperor's name, then you know what happens if you're lying."

"Of course. Do whatever you want with me; hell, skin me and sell my pelt, if that's what it takes."

Was that some sort of morbid Ferrex joke? "What's the reward if we give you a ride?" I asked.

"Five thousand Ener," Keats responded.

"That's pocket change! It's clearly not worth the risk. I'd rather just shoot down some pirate ship instead. I also don't like how you came straight to us instead of putting in a request through the guild. And you're going to tell me this isn't illegal stuff? If it's not illegal, why don't you just go on a passenger ship?"

"To keep out of trouble. If I'm on this ship, I won't run into any of my countrymen, right? That's what I want." Keats then made a show of smacking his floating suitcase again. "Like I said before, it's legal but scandalous—especially among my people."

"Oh!" Mimi piped up at Keats' words. Everyone looked over at her. "Erm, could it be that…there are Ferrex *pelts* inside?"

Keats narrowed his eyes. “Now that’s a shocker! You’re smart, little lady. Did one of my countrymen tell you about it?”

“Yes. I’ve heard that while many were kidnapped, others were killed for their pelts.”

“Hold up.” I glared at Keats, but he responded with an exaggerated shrug.

“Hey now, *hey* now! I’d never do that to my people. These are *legal* goods. We Ferrexes are weak in a whole lot of ways. It takes the strongest of us to go out and risk their lives to make money from Tallmen. Most Ferrexes are scared of Tallmen, so they stay inside the tree and live quiet lives. But after a lifetime of that, some of us reach the end of our ropes. One tree can only hold so many of us, after all.”

Keats hit the suitcase yet again and continued, “And this is where they end up. But thanks to their sacrifices, we can keep on living. We watch over their final moments and make a small profit thanks to it. See, my countrymen hate people like me.”

Things were getting way heavier than I expected, but there was nothing we could do about it. At best, we could take Keats to the Mirei System; nothing more.

“So, you’re appealing to our emotions,” I said.

“Absolutely!” He laughed again. “I mean, what other tools do I have to persuade you?”

With that, I looked away from Keats and to the girls. Mimi’s eyes were clearly pleading for us to do something to help him. Surprisingly, Elma was also looking at me as if demanding to help. *What’s gotten into you girls? Do you owe Keats or something?*

“Mei, would that mess with our route?”

“The Mirei System is on the way to our destination. I’ve looked at the traffic data of Mirei Secundus, and as long as there are no unexpected accidents, our time loss would be less than an hour.”

“Within range of a rounding error, huh?” I said, deep in thought. We had no reason to accept this request, but also no reason to refuse. According to Mei, there was no risk involved. Given her abilities, it would be

extremely hard for Keats to slip out of her sight and do anything fishy. "Fine… But Mei's going to keep an eye on you, Keats."

Guess we can accept it, then. Low risk, low reward. Most of all, the girls really want to do it. I still don't know why exactly, but it's not worth asking about.

"Dang, I get my own maid? Now this is high-class treatment!" Keats grinned sardonically, baring one of his little fangs as he shrugged. *Ugh. He's looking to be a difficult little weasel.*

***

The *Krishna* had three bedrooms. One was the captain's quarters, where I stayed. The other two were originally made for two crew members each, but Mimi and Elma both enjoyed having a room to themselves. We currently had no room just for Mei, so she was using the maintenance pod and other equipment installed for her in the cargo bay as her own room.

That said, there was no room for Keats in the *Krishna*. I didn't want a little weasel in my room, and I'd be damned if I was going to let him stay with Mimi or Elma, so I relegated him to the cargo bay.

"This is your room, such as it is," I declared.

"It's so luxurious, I might just cry." Keats' voice echoed throughout the austere cargo space. We didn't have any loot right now, so it was nice and spacious. I had assigned Keats an empty metal container in a small corner of the room, within arm's reach of Mei's maintenance pod.

"It's a box that used to hold high-quality food cartridges," I explained. "I'd say it's two to three times more luxurious than the average cartridge box." Even so, it was still small enough to carry.

"I appreciate a sturdy box that even I can open, but there's no way you're gonna make me sleep on cold, hard metal," Keats complained.

"No worries there. Mei?"

"Yes." Mei folded up a thin cloth that she was holding and placed it inside the food cartridge container. Now his bed was complete.

“What about a bathroom and shower?” Keats asked.

“Don’t worry about the toilet; we’ve got a portable one. But when it’s time for you to leave, I’ll need you to move its contents to the ship’s toilet.”

“Leave that to me,” Mei said with a nod. If she was willing to do it, then sure. *Thanks, Mei.*

“What should we do about his bath?” I pondered aloud.

“Just let me use the shower. If I used a bath made for Tallmen, I’d drown.”

True. I’d definitely have a problem with that. I mean, who wants to use a bath where someone else *died?*

“Cool. If you need anything, tell Mei. As long as she accompanies you, you’re free to go wherever you want—except for the crew bedrooms, the cockpit, weapons storage, and the generator room.”

“Gotcha. I’ll just take things nice and easy.” Keats climbed into the container. After that, I shot a glance at Mei and then left for the cockpit.

“Are we ready for launch?” I asked the girls as I arrived.

“All ship checks came back okay,” Elma affirmed. “Mimi, how about you?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve sent the request. Keats is good to launch, as well,” Mimi explained.

“Right,” I remembered. “Apparently, he has the right to free travel since he has a license for it.”

“That would be because he’s seen as a proper merchant,” Elma said with a nod.

“Define *proper*.” Based on how he talked, I wasn’t totally sure that he was the most upstanding individual. He probably wasn’t a solo courier; he seemed to be hinting at the existence of some larger organization.

“Erm…” Mimi started nervously. Was she going to apologize for bringing him aboard?

“Don’t worry about Keats,” I said, stopping her. “As long as you’re careful from now on, we’ll be fine.”

“Well, that’s not it… I mean, I am deeply sorry for that, but it isn’t what I was going to say.”

“It’s not?” If it wasn’t about Keats, then what was it? Did they run into something worse when I wasn’t with them? If so, I was more than willing to hear her out.

“Um, is there nothing that we can do to help the Ferrexes?” she asked me.

“Definitely not. We might be a little rich, but in the end, we’re just mercenaries.”

“I see…” Mimi slumped down sadly upon my answer.

One little band of mercenaries couldn’t do something to fix all of the Ferrexes’ societal problems. That was just laughable. We didn’t even have a full perspective of their problems. Besides, their problems were theirs to fix. Trying to extend a helping hand just because we felt bad for them wouldn’t fix anything. Hell, it could just make things worse. There was no magic solution that could fix their species-wide or societal problems all at once.

“You could make it your life’s work to help them with their troubles, if that’s your thing,” I told her. “But right now, I think it’s just best to remember what you’ve seen. No doubt stuff like this will happen again.”

“Yup,” Elma agreed. “The empire is full of humans, elves, Ferrexes, and many more different species. Every single one has its own problems. Not even just species-wide, either; individual colonies do, too. But I don’t have to tell you that, do I?”

“I suppose not…” Mimi had lost a lot of her life to the darkness of Tarmein Prime. Honestly, these problems weren’t just true of the empire; they were probably true of the whole galaxy.

“Anyway, let’s cheer up and get going. In my experience, trouble comes in droves.”

“Totally true.”

“That’s right…”

***

The trip there was actually peaceful and quiet. We faced no particular issues connecting to the hyperlane into the Mirei System. Once we were there, nobody could do anything to us until we arrived at the next system.

"All right, time for some good eats," I declared.

With that, I headed to the cargo space where Mei and Keats were. Hyperdrive travel was almost entirely autopilot, so we took our breaks in shifts. This hyperdrive would take fourteen hours, so I was going to send Mei to the cockpit so we could enjoy a meal. After that, my girls and I would switch to the cockpit while Mei rested.

"Hm?" Keats piped up. "Come to bring me some food?"

"Of course we'll feed you. You can just reimburse us at reward time."

"Sounds good. I've always wondered what mercenaries eat."

I took Keats and Mei out of the cargo space and into the cafeteria, where Mimi was already waiting.

"Sorry, Mei. Could I get you to switch places with Elma in the cockpit?" I asked.

"Understood."

"Let's see what we're eating today…" I used our ship's pride and joy, the Steel Chef 5, to order lunch for me, Mimi, and Elma. "What do Ferrexes eat, anyway?"

"Anything with protein," Keats answered. "We eat carbs too, but protein and fat are our most important nutrients."

"Hmm. Okay, so artificial meat should do. Is there anything that would make you sick?"

"Any food cartridge made to standard specs is just fine."

I searched around on the Steel Chef 5 for something for Ferrexes. To my surprise, they had meals made just for them. I decided to order one.

"You mercs sure do live in luxury, huh?" Keats mused, picking up an artificial steak with a toothpick stuck in it.

All of our meals were classy, thanks to the highly advanced cooker, the Steel Chef. Or at least they *looked* classy: they were actually just imitations made by high-class food cartridges and artificial meat.

"I dunno about others, but this is how we do it," I replied.

As usual, the Steel Chef put out a banger of a meal. How could food cartridges make such delicious food? Perhaps the greatest mystery in all the universe was the Steel Chef 5 itself.

"I dunno if Tallman-sized facilities work for me, but the place looks a lot tidier than you'd expect."

"Does it? Hee hee…" Mimi fidgeted happily at his praise. "The two of us actually put all of this together ourselves."

Cute, but stop doing that while you're holding food. You don't wanna get sauce all over your clothes.

"Don't expect this to be like the average mercenary ship," Elma warned. "I'd say most mercs are more like what you expect." According to her, most mercenaries lived meager lives under the pretense of masculinity. I'd say they just seemed more like extreme masochists.

"Really? Well, if that's what the crew says, I guess it must be true." Keats cocked his head before shrugging and biting into his artificial steak. "*Damn!* What kind of artificial meat was I eating all this time?" He was agape, muttering to himself as he ate the artificial steak. The Steel Chef 5 was so damn good that you had to wonder if they were the same food cartridges and meats.

"How much did that Steel Chef run us, anyway?" I asked. "Not any more than 50,000, right?"

"I believe the manufacturer's suggested retail price was 48,000."

"That's expensive… You mercs sure do prosper, huh?" Keats sounded exasperated by our conversation, but he ate fast regardless. He seemed expectant after finishing his portion, so when I told him he was free to take more, he lit up and gladly did so.

Don't eat too much, though. If you eat too fast and throw up, you'll have to use our medical pod. I sure hope that thing works on Ferrexes.

***

As I predicted, Keats did eat far too much than was good for him and ended up vomiting. The little puke weasel went right to sleep in his container afterward, though, which saved us a lot of effort. In the end, we successfully transported both him and his cargo. We were worried that we might run into more trouble like usual, but it seemed to be a needless fear this time.

"You really helped me out, brother!" he thanked me.

"Yeah, yeah, I know I did."

Keats made a strange, high-pitched noise akin to a laugh.

"I'm not taking you back home, though," I reminded him.

"Yeah, I'll just grab a merchant ship to get back. I've got negotiations anyway, so I'll be in this colony for a while." With that, Keats tapped his floating suitcase. I was worried that someone might steal it after we left him, but it probably had some sort of security mechanism.

"Good luck, Keats," Mimi said.

"Careful out there!" Elma added.

"We wish for your success," Mei chimed in as well.

"Yeah. Thanks, girlies." Keats turned his little self around and left with his suitcase, disappearing into the crowd of the port district.

"Okay, girls. Let's get out of here before we have to pay docking fees!"

"Okay!"

"Aye aye."

"Yes, Master."

I let Mimi and the others onto the *Krishna* before I finally climbed the ladder. Before getting on, I looked upon the crowd in Mirei Secundus one last time. I didn't know if we would ever meet Keats again in this vast galaxy. Thinking about it logically, it was much more likely that we probably wouldn't.

“Are you coming?” Mimi called out to me.

“Yeah! Sorry…” Either way, our paths would diverge now. Only God knows if we’ll ever see Keats again.

“If you don’t hurry, we’ll have to pay docking fees!” she reminded me.

“Yeah, yeah. Quit pushing me.” I didn’t resist Mimi as she pushed me into the *Krishna*. Like I said myself, it was time for us to get to our own journey.

We were off to the Vlad System to buy ourselves a mothership.

Afterword

THANKS FOR READING volume four of *Reborn as a Space Mercenary*! It's me, Ryuto!

Volume Two of the manga is on sale, and Mimi and Elma are just adorable! Go buy it! (This is what they call "direct marketing.")

Let's get the stuff about me out of the way. Life has been peaceful. No major illnesses. I've limited myself to one energy drink a day. No overdoses for me! Also, I've been going to Co*t*o lately, where I've gotten very into their dried dates (the fruit, that is). They're delicious, like dried persimmons. Cheaper, too. Mmm… generic dried persimmons.

At the time of writing, it's the start of autumn. Since it's getting chilly around here, my dog has monopolized my lap, whether I'm working or not. *Get down, you.*

Now, let's get to talking about the novel. It's part two of the nobility nonsense! This one comes with plenty of bonus text, including more parts with Serena and more fighting. Also, I've written an extra-long EX chapter this time. Also *also*, I hear there are people who read the afterword first. Spoilers incoming! Go read the rest of the volume!

Now, as is tradition, let's get to a bit of world-building that we couldn't find time for in the story itself. This time, let's talk about the spread of food cartridges and the automatic cookers that prepare them.

In this universe, synthesized food made from cartridges can be found almost anywhere you go. Normal food, made from cooking real ingredients, is seen as a high-class good that only a select few rich people enjoy. Most people never get to eat it, even once.

There are a lot of reasons that led to this, but the main one is that hyperdrive was awfully slow in its early years. Sometimes, people could spend an entire year in the ship, so they had to test out different ways of carrying lots of food without it being too heavy. As a result of said testing, they created food cartridges—a blend of animal plankton, algae, herbs, and the like—along with the automatic cookers to make food from them.

Food cartridges and cookers were so convenient that they became used not just by people in spaceships, but also the colonies and other planets that they colonized. Eventually, normal food was phased out in favor of cartridges.

The resources required to make the cartridges, such as the plankton and algae, were comparatively easy to produce even in colonies. On new residential planets, they developed technology to turn the inedible flora and fauna into food cartridges. As such, the spread of cartridges and cookers accelerated further.

The automatic cooker market became a fierce battlefield where cutting-edge tech vied for market share. Intelligence on other corporations became so vital that spies were in great demand. Sometimes, they even fought with lasers. Scary!

Anyway, I think it's about time for me to go.

Thank you to my manager, K; our illustrator, Tetsuhiro Nabeshima; and everyone involved in the publication of this book. Most of all, a huge thank you to everyone who bought and read this book.

Let's meet again in Volume 5. I hope to see you there! Bye-bye!

—RYUTO

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryuto

A brown bear living in Hokkaido.

My hobby is gaming. I have a wide range of tastes, but survival action and strategy games are my absolute favorites.

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